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STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY
A STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S NOVEL IN CUSTODY

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ABSTRACT

Identity allows a person feel secure and complete whether it is social identification as a person from his co- beings or cultural identity by a society including one in once culture or place or even acknowledgement from his own family which allows a person feel unique or particular. Without identity one may feel insecure and lost. So a human always craves for acknowledgement at first from his family then from society and to achieve that he struggles his whole life taking inappropriate and indefinite paths and at last finds that the actual achievement is not lies in external identity but it is more the internal accomplishment of one's self reliance contentment and bliss. Anita Desai's *In Custody* deals with such an individual, who unadjusted to his circumstances and due to lack of individuality struggles for self identity within the society and after facing much negativity from people and circumstances he finds his inner strength and readies himself to accept life as it comes.

Key Words: Identity, Self reliance, individuality, struggle, acceptance, circumstances, limitations, departure.

Introduction

Man in his life efforts for many things like to earn his livelihood or to possess material objects but along with that he struggles for one more purpose that is for social identity; He does not like to live unnoticed in the society. He strives for identification as a person from his co beings to feel complete. In the contemporary world man obsessed by material possessions remains hollow internally and crave for external identity from people around him and people too acknowledges him with external pseudo qualities of appearance, fame and prosperity but not with the inner abilities which are rather important to be called a man as human. Today, every human being runs behind possessing worldly achievements and in that process he engages himself in misplaced priorities instead of striving towards meaningful actions. He stumbles at every step pushing him into a pit of trauma and melancholy but at some point in life he finds the truth that life is not just for external materialistic achievements but also for the achievement of inner bliss to live a contented life.

The protagonist of Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* is one such a person who internally fragile and unadjusted with his circumstances struggles to get identity in the society. He leaving back the realities runs behind mirages which at that moment out of his capacity and faculty. In that process of achievement he under goes various experiences and complexities of life and understands his weaknesses and limitations and emerges as a wiser man. He gains self assurance and turns into a new person with a thought that it is not important to

have material achievements or get external identity from people as much as it is important to get inner strength to face realities of life.

From *In Custody* the novelist Anita Desai takes departure from her previous themes. Her earlier novels revolve around woman's quest for identity, the repression she faces within the family and society, marital disharmony, generation conflicts and anti-Semitism but her later novels focus on the spirit of nationality, social problems existing in the contemporary society, east-west cultural collision, Vedanta and Philosophy where as *In Custody* too dealt in psychological perspective but with male protagonist and male centered narrative unlike her previous novels with women protagonists and their psychological aspects. Anita Desai is a great analyst of Psychological insights and inner concerns. Her novels depict the kaleidoscopic image of the minds of her characters with a mesmerizing art. Her keen observation of emotions and feelings add greater debts to her themes. Her novels are reflective of social realities which she depicts through a psychological perspective but does not look at them as a social reformer.

Deven Sharma is a lecturer in Hindi in Lala Ramlal College in Mirpore, a small town near Delhi. In his childhood his father passes away and he had brought up by his poor helpless mother so Deven naturally grows into a meek and uncertain person. He is portrayed as a diffident and awkward hero, an average man lacking initiative and confidence. The prime traits of Deven which attracts our attention is his helplessness, humility, suffering, nobility and his dissatisfaction with life. So due to lack of positivity and inner emptiness he starts searching it in external things and materialistic achievements. Through the character of Deven Sharma, Anita Desai tries to exemplify the position of an individual in this materialistic society where the socio economic factors shape and mould one's personality and psyche.

Deven marries Sarla and has a child Manu. For Deven the present life is empty and boring. His life shuffles between realities and fantasies. Realities are his family and his job which he considers oppressive since they are not of his choice. Marrying his wife Sarla is also of his aunt and mother's choice and he feels she is a quite mismatch to his poetic views. Again the job he is doing is also not of his taste. He works as Hindi teacher in a private college to earn his livelihood but loves Urdu language and poetry most and fantasizes to achieve some identity in society by contributing some distinction to Urdu poetry. Again the place Mirpore where he lives considers a prison or a trap, where he has to spend all his life as he does not have any existence out of it. The barren and lifeless town seems to him so restricted. Mirpore is as any Indian town with its general pattern of life but for Deven it is a mirage, where he neither finds a place for his dreams nor any growth to his personality.

Since marriage, family, job and the town where he resides are not of his choice he feels himself placed in a cage. To come out of that cage he finds an opportunity when his childhood friend Murad offers him to interview the famous Urdu poet Nur shahjahnabadi for Murad's magazine Awaz. This sudden opportunity blinds Deven to his own economical and personal limitations. He just keeping belief in the opportunity given by his friend, though surrounded by financial crises, takes leave from college and shuttles every day from Mirpore to Delhi to interview Nur the famous Urdu poet. He finds these trips as elevation of happiness and freedom but returns empty hand every night as Nur in contrary to Deven's expectations turns out a cunning, demanding and selfish old man with many vices and hardly left any creativity within him. Deven imagines Nur that he will be like god and his words must be like divine poetry but finds him a frivolous person using vulgar language and surrounded by lafngas and bazaar shop keepers with their blatant talk about what went on in akhadas and brothels and their excessive drinking and eating large amounts of biryani, kebabs and pulav in most unsightly manner. Contrary to Deven's romantic vision of poets and their lives, Nur's place mocks at Deven's fantasy with its unspeakable filth and noise. Deven, who expects Nur living with elderly and dignified intellectuals and poets of his stature, finds only misery.

Not only his professional life but his personal life is also dishonorable. No one respects the poet in his family. With over eating and drinking when he suffers from ulcers and wails in front of his second wife who once was a prostitute she screams at him calling him swine and pig. On seeing the disgusting behavior of the poet's wife Deven runs away from the scene the moment he gets opportunity. The poet tells Deven about his miserable personal life and abuses his wife in filthy language. The angry out burst of the poet speaks the hollowness in his life. Like Deven Nur too craved for external identity of name and fame and some how

achieved it but internally remained empty for ever. As Deven goes back to Mirpore from poet's house on the way he remembers the contrast of the two moments, when he first enters the Nur's house with enthusiasm and hope and when he comes out of the house with panic and dismay signifying the difference between anyone's thought of fantasy and life of reality.

Not only the second wife but poet's first wife too troubles Deven. She bargains with him to send her husband for reciting the verse for his recording. She expects money in return for that. Deven gets very little amount as salary and it is very difficult for him to maintain the minimum requirements of his family with that money. Again he has to adjust all the expenses of his meetings with Nur which throws him into more financial crises.

The environment of the city and house, where Nur resides too suffocates Deven. It is ironical that Deven goes from Mirpore to Delhi in search of fame and freedom without noticing the fact that Delhi itself is a "walled city." (Pg-187) "If it not been the colour and noise Chandinichowk might have been a bazaar encountered in a nightmare. It was so like a maze from which he could find no exit" (Pg-32). So it concludes that it is not the place which makes man contented or happy but his mental status that leads him towards success or failure.

All these incidents teach Deven a lesson to come out of illusion and face reality by gathering inner strength. But still the pain of gloom and barrenness make him suffer because he is unable to make total escape from Nur's world because of his passion for Urdu poetry and achievement. Physical escape is quite easy but emotionally he is still knotted with his dreams and desires.

Deven takes loan from college to buy a tape recorder to record Nur's recites but the shop keeper instead of new piece sells old one to Deven and that damaged old good troubles him throughout the recording. Due to lack of knowledge in handling an electronic good Deven takes assistance of Chicoo the recording assistant arranged by the shop – keeper, who always troubles Deven with his clumsy and inept attitude and makes the recording big disaster. He records mostly sounds of traffic and trumpets in the streets and rarely any verse of Nur.

Deven's childhood friend Murad, the spoilt rich boy with money in his pocket for cinema shows and cigarettes betrays him at every stage in his project. He always laughs at Deven for his unsuccessful life and mocks at him as a "two cigarette man" (Pg-2) as Deven cannot afford more than that. Murad does not pay money for the reviews written by Deven for his magazine awaz. He exploits Deven on the name of friendship and never supports Deven at the time of his failures. Again Deven's dream to interview Nur gets shattered because of the unsupportive behavior of many people who ditch him at every stage of his work. He asks his students to help him in editing work of his tapes but in return they expect to award more marks in final examinations. Deven expects that the opportunity of interviewing Nur will open an entirely new world of name and fame for him but it ends in fiasco. Now the college committee insists to repay the loans taken by him for the literary work and they ask Deven to submit his tapes on part of his taking leave from the collage for the research on Urdu poetry. He dreams of a successful and meaningful life without troubles but life teaches him a lesson that if there is no pains no gains too.

Deven as a man of confusion and conflict is always haunted by a sense of failure and imprisonment. His soul seeks liberation from the pressures of life where he trapped. For now to Deven all the relations seem only customs; as a friend, as a husband as a teacher and as a disciple.

It was really a custom that was the lasting ingredient of friendship, nothing but a custom and custom could be a well from which one never rose, a trap from which there was no release. (Pg-175) These relations in his life not give him any happiness or security. So he regards himself a trapped animal in his relations and again in his own desires. To fulfill those desires and commitments he becomes prey to many people. Firstly Murad, who suggests to start the project to get financial benefit for himself out of it. Nur and his wives too trap him to fulfill their own financial benefits. His college students too exploit him asking for more marks and grades as they helped him editing the tape.

He who had set out to hunt Nur was down being hunted down as prey to many people (Pg-161).

People around him, his inability and circumstances kill his enthusiasm and vision towards his work.

Deven quite lost the earlier vision of the shining horizon and the empty road, hurled as he was upon the flying horse of a merry-go-round that turned upon its axle with such rattling speed that he could decipher no one image, follow no single sequence and was merely aware of the rush of the things as they sped by. (Pg-165)

When Deven's project of interviewing Nur fails everyone abandons the project. Murad seems to be amused after the total fiasco of recording sessions with Nur. He gives some advice to Deven and goes away. His behavior indicates basic human nature. If a person does something successfully, everyone tries to become a part of it but nobody wants to associate with an unsuccessful project.

Now Deven is restless and frustrated and wants to come out of this disaster by somehow completing the project. In that restlessness he walks towards a canal. He stretches the night endlessly by walking on and on. He does not want the day to dawn since he finds no possibility to escape. Not knowing to where to turn he stands alone at cross roads. He finds that darkness dissolving into the day light and soon the sun would blaze. This means he has to prepare to face the blazing sun and pitiless problems of the next day very bravely.

He walked up the path. Soon the sun would be up and blazing. The day would be up with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them. (Pg-233)

His mind goes deep into the problem and finally finds solution to it as 'to face the life as it comes'. He strengthens within self and acquires a new confidence to face the problems. He welcomes the next day of life which may cut him down like swords but he has to face it as he aspires to keep the gift of Nur's poetry whatever the cost he might pay for it. He decides to be custodian of Nur's poetry which is a great distinction. He realizes that the inner strength is not dependent on external happenings or identity that comes from others. If he is filled spiritually he will not have the need to crave for acknowledgement from others and again that inner strength allows him to make things done easily. Now it is the time of dawn and the sun light, dissolving the darkness of the night and start of a new day symbolic of the emergence of the new courageous self of Deven discarding his previous timid indecisive self.

Here through Deven the novelist evokes the diverse trends that affect the contemporary middle class Indian, who trapped in the web of his aspiration for identity struggles to achieve it and in that process he exposed to much trauma and turbulence at last finds self reliance and turns into a new person. We can find it as a nature's procedure where a fledgling turns as a swan or a common man changes as a perfect human knowing the difference between expectation and experience, fantasy and actuality, illusion and reality.

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