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# ARTICLE

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## *In Custody: Deven's Alienation from Self*

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### Abstract

*The term 'alienation' is a word with scores of connotations. According to Webster's Dictionary, it means "a withdrawing or separation of a person, or his affections, from an object or position of former attachment". Alienation is that sense of estrangement which is generated by failure on the part of a person to fulfil one's desire. It is the concealed affliction of an individual soul. In theory such alienation may be traced back to the doctrine individualism, when man considers himself secluded, insecure and anxious for his physical, cerebral, and metrical wellbeing. Deven, the central character of Anita Desai's illustrious novel *In Custody* (1983), published in 1984, seems swayed that if and when he falls, nobody will pity and help him. Each man, in a sense, considers himself an alien in this world, and so he remains. He does not question why he is alone or why the world seems to be unresponsive to him. He is born alone, and is probably haunted by the feeling of loneliness or psychosomatic marginalization.*

**Key Words:** alienation, individualism, psychosomatic marginalization.

Speaking of her fictional mode, Anita Desai, the youngest of the major Indian English novelists, explains:

By writing novels that have been catalogued by critics as psychological, and that purely subjective, I have been left free to employ, simply the language of the interior. Even when two characters meet, they use this particular type of language—the language of their thoughts, their interior selves which has nothing to do with geography and can be written in any language. (Das 78)

It is clear from the above statement that Anita Desai is more interested in the “interior selves” (Naik 241) than in the social and political realities. Her protagonists are individuals for “whom aloneness alone” (Naik 241) is “the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth

treasuring (Naik 241). Writing for her, “is an effort to discover, and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things” (Naik 241).

Desai’s distinguished novel *In Custody* (1983), published in 1984, “dramatizes a conflict which is central to several of Desai’s novels: that between a passive and reflective mode of existence and more outward and passionate engaged life” (Ali 725).

Here, timid protagonist Deven, the denizen of a neglected town, Mirpore, where the inhabitants appear to be devoid of dignity in their sphere of life, the son of a middle-class widow who has to accept the drudgery of an ill-paid job of a lecturer in Hindi literature in a college ( Lala Ram Lal College) has been represented as an alienated self.

The term ‘alienation’ is a word with many connotations. According to Webster’s Dictionary, it means “a withdrawing or separation of a person, or his affections, from an object or position of former attachment”. Alienation is that sense of estrangement which is generated by failure on the part of a person to fulfil one’s desire. It is the hidden suffering of an individual soul. In theory such alienation may be traced back to the doctrine individualism, when man considers himself isolated, insecure and anxious for his physical, mental, and metrical wellbeing. He seems convinced that if and when he falls, nobody will pity and help him.

So man stands in the state of alienation. Each man, in a sense, considers himself an alien in this world, and so he remains. He does not question why he is alone or why the world seems to be unresponsive to him. He is born alone, and is probably haunted by the feeling of loneliness in his childhood. As he grows up, he understands himself more in relation to the world and his fellows. With the understanding comes selfish love. It makes him respect the society for the sake of his safety and security. He gets attached to his family, his house and the material with which he works. His selfish love makes him respect the world with which he in conflict.

From her studies of human nature, Desai has formulated her doctrine of alienation: Aloneness is man’s real condition. In her novel *In Custody* she has laid stress on the doctrine in her own way. According to Desai we believe that each man is an alien, a stranger in this world, and so he remains. She suggests that the feeling of alienation oppresses a man because his mind is a creation of this world. By world she means the values prevalent in the modern society. She also points out that the symptoms of alienation in man’s mind are a feeling of loneliness, anxiety, despair, and a vague sense of fear. These symptoms are evident in every modern individual. So Deven in Desai’s

Novel *In Custody* is not an exception in this world because, Deven's lack of fulfilment is highlighted through the progression of his thoughts which deal with the tension between his dream and actuality, between his aspiration and achievement. His agony puts him in an unfathomable despair and alienates him from not only this world, but also from his own self.

Deven, who is conscious of his own inadequacy, finds his world turns upside down when he becomes involved with one of Delhi's leading poets, the mercurial Nur, a poet of Urdu Literature, a figure he has previously idolized. The conflict between two modes of existence is also played out on another level, with the safe comfortable language of Hindi, the subject Deven teaches, being contrasted with the passionate outpouring of Nur's Urdu verse. In the first of the two passages extracted here, Deven is commissioned by his friend Murad, the son of a wealthy Kashmiri carpet dealer in Delhi, a spoilt rich boy, and an editor of a magazine- *Awaz*, to interview Nur; in the second he goes to do so. Murad begins to influence Deven again and again to collect some special articles for his journal. For a moment confused Deven thinks it is not Nur who is the comet but Murad who has come from Delhi to show him light; he is willing to believe everything. Deven assures Murad by saying that he would be extremely happy if he could do something for his magazine but he is unable to give up his job, his only source of income for, he has to support his family consists of his wife Sarla and a son, Manu. "I know, I know, Murad", Deven sighed 'How happy I would be to join you on the staff, work for you, for the journal. But I can't give up my job here. I had to take it when it was offered. I was married, Sarla was expecting, you know [...]' (15). Deven dreams of restoring Urdu (Urdu Poetry of Nur) to its original pedestal glory. Deven dreams of becoming a poet to have an individual identity in this modern world. Now he lives in an ivory tower.

However, Deven starts his journey with the intention to have an interview with Nur to bring out a magazine where Urdu language, especially, Urdu poetry of Nur may be kept alive. Led by a boy Deven nervously enters the room where he reveals his identity to Nur and informs him that he has come from Mirpore with a letter from Murad beg, an editor of *Awaz*- which contains a special request to allow him an interview on Urdu poetry. Nur reacts against it and tells him that Urdu poetry is dead and waiting to be buried. But Deven assures him that they would never allow that to happen. His assurance impresses Nur in certain ways.

On the other hand, it is very pathetic that he is becoming detached from his family as a consequence of his new responsibility his acquaintance with Nur has given him.

Deven rattled homeward by bus swimming in the current of frustration as he fails to have the proposed interview for which he went to Delhi bearing all his problems of day-to-day life. He thinks sorrow visits him with the advancement of dawn and daylight. His embittered mind decides not to go home to see Sarla's stony face but he thinks it would be better for him to go to the college directly to heave a sigh of relief for the moment. However, he comes back home like a stranger where Sarla keeps herself aloof from him and consequently he writes in the state of alienation from his wife and son: "When he did get home, Sarla was standing in the doorway with her arms and her sari wrapped about her shoulders [...]". (65) "[...] and satred at him as if he were stranger, an interloper" (66). Deven could not make out what he would do because, he cannot deny his duty to his son and his family. He cannot let them starve. The question of educational responsibility to his college students arises in his mind, where if he fails to perform it, he will be isolated from his college students. His irresponsibility to his college students has already made him alienated as a teacher: "that was what made him a boring teacher [...]". (12)

After a long mental struggle he decides to see Nur after receiving his letter. It is the birthday celebration of Imtiaz Begum when Deven comes to meet Nur for the second time where he wants to know from Nur if he has sometning to dictate to him for which he needs someone to help him as his assistant. But he does not actually want what Nur wants. He only wants to have an interview to write an article for the journal. Even he desires to record Nur's voice and recitation.

Deven dreams that if he succeeds to publish Nur's poetry after fifteen years of silence, it will be "a whale in a pail of water" (98). But he needs a tape recorder which Abid Siddqui, the head of the Urdu Department of his college, supplies him.

On the day of third attempt of Deven to have an interview with the help of an operator of tape-recorder but unfortunately Nur denies and asks him to go back to his house and to leave this out of his mind. Nur rebukes him and Nur's wife demands a large sum of money to arrange an interview. Deven is terribly upset as he has no money to pay Nur's wife.

Here, we see that Deven is mentally depressed. Sarla has begun to suspect him for his frequent visit to Delhi because, she thinks he (Deven) goes to Delhi for some undisclosed affair or enjoyment. Misunderstanding vitiates the whole relationship. The tragic conflict that lies at the

core of personal existence is something completely private, something hidden from public view, and revealed only in glimpses as the story-teller develops her tale. Existentialism points to the meaninglessness of human life. He thinks himself as a caged animal in a zoo. "Marriage, family and job have placed him to this; now there is no way out of it."(131) "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile [...]" (Petersen 187).

Siddiqui, the head of the Urdu Department, sanctions money for Deven to pay Begum for the proposed interview which gladdens him so much. Deven is in hope in hopelessness. Deven hands over a flat envelop to begum and thus gets the permission to talk to Nur. There, intoxicated Nur began to recite some verses and poems but it is Chiku who fails to record properly, has recorded mainly all his abuses, his order for palatable dish and drinks along with some poems. "By doing this he (Deven) draws attention very emphatically to the falseness of any scheme of order, and there by highlights the violent and chaotic reality of modern life" (Peck 110). The innermost thoughts and feelings of Deven are laid bare through a sort of cinematographic close up. It very clearly indicates his alienation or his psychological marginalization.

Within a few days Deven, with the help of Pintu, another nephew of Murad is capable of writing something which is enough for an article, or perhaps a monograph which the college printing press may like to print, otherwise the Urdu Department may print it. He, then, goes to Murad and hands over the article.

Nur's agonizing death shocked Deven too much. It also made Deven feel his unfathomable responsibility to enliven Nur through the publication of his works, as his interior monologue reflects:

"He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into safe custody, and not realised that if he who was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too". (203) "He had accepted the gifts of Nur's poetry and that meant he was the custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure".(204)

Deven's dream of restoring Urdu to its original pedestal of glory has been partially (or in a fashion) fulfilled through his association with Nur. The great question to Deven is, how does he feel about life? What, in the last analysis, is his professionalism and from his fantasticalness. This

is isolation of an artist from his own world. Like Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, *In Custody* seeks to focus the mind of Deven lost in darkness of his confused purposes and thwarted ambitions. Pip, in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, is a boy, an alien in the sordid and vulgar surroundings but rises above it and tries to become a gentleman. The play, *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne, is a frightening study of alienation of Jimmy, an uneducated working-class man in a social milieu hostile to his aspirations and needs. His cynicism, bitterness and anger are Hamletian, and betray his pain and anguish for the purposelessness of his life. In Deven's case it is not only just the disparity between his dreams and actuality, but the fulfilment of his dreams, his values self-created and self-realised, though hopelessly disproportionate to the circumstances he is trying to control.

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