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Of Poets and Wives: Gender Politics in Desai's In Custody

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Abstract

The paper examines Anita Desai's In Custody on the expression of resistance pertinent to gender and postcolonial predicament. Anita Desai, a well-known Indian writer during the post-Independence era, has been a powerful voice in representation of the domestic Indian realm. Thus, the portrayal of women and their battles against patriarchal and colonial oppression isthe central theme in Desai's writings. The independent India, did not free women from the idealised conceptions of womanhood that the colonialists and the traditional community in that country fostered. This article focuses on how women are portrayed, how they resist, and what avenues they take to stay alive in post-independence India. Homi K. Bhabha has shed light on a wide range of important topics that are essential to comprehending the colonial and post-colonial conditions since 1980s. His theory of "mimicry" is applied to investigate the socio-cultural interactions that Desai's works aimto make clear.

Keywords: In Custody, Patriarchy, Resistance, Mimicry, Colonialism

Introduction

Anita Desai stated that the sensibility of modern Indian female writers has remained noticeably discernible from that of their male counterparts. Female writers, Desai assumes, "tend to place their emphasis differently from men" because their experiences and "values" are different; being relatively confined within the closed boundaries of domestic space, women writers are "more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation," whereas men are mostly "concerned with action, experience and achievement" (qtd.Gupta, 2002, p.104).Anita Desai claims that Indian women writers are still searching for their own feminine identities and attempting to make them seem valuable.

The novels of Anita Desai depict the radical feminine revolt against patriarchally defined ideal femininity customs and the shifting perspectives towards it. Anita Desai seems to have changed over the course of her books from revealing her characters' inner lives to seeing the connections between a person's psyche and the social and cultural context. inconsistencies in the portrayal of postcolonial subaltern women develop as a result of Anita Desai's examination of the Indian home environment; she examines these inconsistencies within the context of the realist tradition. That being said, her fiction is not a mimetic portrayal of Indian society. Anita Desai provides a textual representation as:

accommodates the conventions of mimesis while questioning and subverting them in order to secure a perspective that is both ambivalent and open-ended, one that displaces the colonial and the patriarchal in order to speculate a space for the marginal and the oppressed.

(Kanaganayakam, 2002, p.80)

Due to their shared goal of opposing oppressive practices, feminism and post-colonialism have been able to develop as resistance movements in tandem with the oppression and marginalisation brought about by the colonial condition. One of Anita Desai's primary themes in her books is the representation of women and their attempts to achieve subjectivity. Her writing reflects this disparity in experience.

The present paper examines the intersections of patriarchal and postcolonial borders in Desai's *In Custody* in view of identifying the sites of resistance and the possibility of enacting a postcolonial subjectivity. By highlighting the lived experiences of marginalised subjectivities in post-independence India and offering a fresh viewpoint on the social and cultural arenas that have been dominated by powerful structures, the novel demonstrates resistance within the feminist and postcolonial discourse. In this specific context, resistance refers to the efforts of authors like Desai, who seek to expose the subtleties of the postcolonial predicament and contest the dominant passive, homogenising perspective of postcolonial Indian women.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said primarily focuses on the colonisers while maintaining a clear distinction between the domains of the coloniser and the colonised. The way in which the coloniser and the colonised communicate culturally is one of the concerns that Said does not address; Homi Bhabha's colonial discourse analysis addresses this issue. Bhabha says, "There is always, in Said, the suggestion that colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer, which is a historical and theoretical simplification" (Bhabha qtd. Young, 2004, p. 182). However, the idea that colonial power operated by splitting the world into self and other is shared by Said and Bhabha's critical viewpoints. This was done in order to maintain colonial rule and defend its repressive laws and material inequality. The ideology of colonialism postulated a divide in culture between the Orient and the Occident. The suppressed and repressed Indian lady quickly came to represent the colonisers' values in the setting of colonial India. According to Partha Chatterjee, "by assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country" (qtd. Kanaganayakam, 2002, p.82). Spivak famously phrases this self-assigned "civilizing mission" of imperialism as: "White men saving brown women from brown men" (Can the Subaltern Speak,1998, p.296).

The nationalist iconography, which portrayed the Indian lady as the defender and embodiment of Indian spirituality and heritage, stood in opposition to the imperialist goal of civilization. Gandhi encouraged women to actively participate in public acts of passive resistance against imperialism by using the image of the woman as the symbol of the Indian country, Chatterjee describes, "Indian women were supposed to dress in Indian clothes, they must not eat, drink, or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of religious rituals that men were finding difficult to carry out; they must maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin to which men could not now devote much attention" (1993, p.130).

The national anti-colonial resistance did not fulfill its promises and failed to provide women's freedom. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha explores the impacts of nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism and distinguishes mimicry as one of the "concepts that work to undermine the simple polarization of the world into self and other" (Huddart, 2006, p. 4). In his essay "Of Mimicry and Men," Bhabha defines mimicry "as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (Bhabha,1994, p.85). It is understood that there is ambivalence in the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised at the imitation site. When colonial discourse professes cultural superiority over the colonised people and encourages the colonised subject to "mimic" them by adopting their cultural habits, mannerisms, and values, the result is never just a straightforward duplication of those cultural attributes.

Bhabha declares that "mimicry displays the colonial desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (Bhabha Location, 1994, p. 86). Bhabha links the problem of stereotypes and the evolution of coloni-

al representation to the ambivalence of colonial discourse as:

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (Bhabha,1994, p.75)

According to Bhabha, the ambivalence inherent in mimicking creates room for the colonizer's agency and resistance. Anxiety stems from the ongoing conflict between the appearance of uniqueness and the actuality of uniformity. Bhabha claims that colonial power is constantly afraid of losing control and never being able to establish a solid, safe division between itself and the colonised. He contends that this fear creates a void in colonial discourse that the oppressed and colonised can take advantage of in their fights against dominance. In this sense mimicry marks "those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance" (Bhabha, 1994, p.121).

The story of *In Custody* revolves around the tragicomic life of Deven Sharma, who resides in the small village of Mirpore, close to Delhi, along with his spouse Sarla and their son Manu. Deven is a gullible lecturer who works as a temporary Hindi literature instructor at Lala Ram Lai College. Urdu poetry, an almost extinct art form, is his real interest. His longtime buddy Murad, who is the editor of the Urdu periodical "Awaz" and the son of a wealthy carpet merchant from Kashmir, requests that he write a feature on Nur Shah Jehanabadi, the best living Urdu poet.The thought of doing an interview with a poet as great as Nur (literally: light) whose name "opened doors and changed expressions" is like a ray of hope for Deven who "had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings" (IC, 1994, 26). Deven dislikes Imtiaz since he assumes that she is clearly the cause of the poet's degradation.As far as it concerns Deven, the novel is "a vision of life being lived inside a trap, while having a vision, as Dev has, through the poetry he loves, of a very different world, and not being able to break through to that until the very last moment when Dev accepts his life just as it is, and realizes that if he lives it, that is his freedom, too" (Gee, 2002, p.9).

Imtiaz Begum, Nur's second wife, is one among those shouting voices. Interestingly, Desai tried to exclude female characters from the primary plot of this novel, yet instead we have a powerful female character in Imtiaz (which, paradoxically, means "advantage"). Imtiaz is not a stereotypical lady like other female characters in her novels; instead, she is a singular woman searching for her own identity. Because of her intelligence and creative potential, Imtiaz is a subversive woman who is unfit for the duties that patriarchal postcolonial Indian society has for women. Because Imtiaz is a talented writer, she is "In Custody" of the male-dominated literary and social community. Because she goes against what is expected of a traditional Hindu woman and asks for more from her community, she is called cunning and ostracised. This marginalisation and accusation come from both male figures and other women, including Nur's former wife, who have accepted the patriarchal norms of Indian society, "A fine actress, that one, chuckled the old woman… 'She used to be a dancing girl out there… 'and she knows all the dancer's tricks. Now she's persuaded them she's really ill. It is always like that when she wants something from him, always" (IC, 1994, p.121).

Desai represents patriarchy as "a system in which both men and women participate" (Johnson, 2005, p.5). In the two women's relationship Desai's hints at the complexities of the gender relations. As Choubey asserts, "Desai as a true humanist puts the blame not only on men who are suffering with the complex of male-superiority but also on women who oppress their kind" (Choubey,2004, p.89). Thus, the division of gender roles may be more complex than a simple male oppressor/female oppressed relationship.

Imtiaz defies the rules of her life by using the "master's tool," the male-dominated Urdu poetry language, to prove her existence, make her voice heard, and fight injustice. Exploring her unique subjectivity Imtiaz "writes back" to the oppressive forces of her community; she becomes a 'mimic woman,' an altered female subject and a figure capable of uttering resistance, who is both "resemblance and menace":

When Deven brought himself to listen to a line or two, it was just as he thought: she

said she was a bird in a cage, that she longed for flight, that her lover waited for her. She said the bars that held her were cruel and unjust, that her wings had been hurt by beating against them and only God could come and release her by lifting the latch on the cage door, God in the guise of her lover. When would he come? She languished, panting for the clouds that would carry him to her and the rain that would require her thirst […] from Nur, and it was disgraceful how she was imitating his verses, parodying his skills, flaunting before his face what she had stolen from him, so slyly, so cunningly. (IC, 1994, p.82)

Though Bhabha seems to be gender-blind in his analysis of colonial and postcolonial condition, his theory of mimicry can be applied to Desai's narrative. Discussing the notion of mimicry Bhabha maintains that, as one of the strategies of colonial power and knowledge, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite […] Mimicry is […] a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline which 'appropriates' the Other as its visualized power" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). When colonial discourse 'desires' the colonized subject to 'mimic' the colonizer's cultural habits, language, manners and values the result can only be a blurred copy which Bhabha calls a "sly civility." This "repetition with difference" is menacing because of "its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Bhabha, qtd.Huddart, 2006, p.88). Thus, Mimicry initiates the process of resistance and marks the anti-colonial attempt toward distinctiveness through the logic of "inappropriate appropriation" (Gandhi, 1998, p.150).

"Mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever, it mimics. Mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour of the colonized" (Ashcroft Key Concepts, 2007, p. 125). This area between mimicry and mockery is, according to Bhabha, where the certainty of the reforming, civilizing mission of colonial authority is threatened and disrupted (Bhabha,1994, p.86). Bhabha sees mimicry as "the sly weapon of anti-colonial civility, an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience"(Gandhi, 2006, p.149). The mimic subject in the process of reforming challenges the inherent assumptions of colonial discourse by articulating it, as Bhabha puts it, "syntagmatically with a range of differential knowledges and positionalities that both estrange its 'identity' and produce new forms of knowledge, new modes of differentiation, new sites of power" (Bhabha, 1994, p.120).

It appears that the male and female characters' connection develops as a hierarchical one throughout the story of In Custody, and it mirrors the same disparities of the hierarchical relationship between colonisers and colonised. As previously explained, there is a strong desire and motivation in colonial situations to make the oppressed and colonised look, behave, and possess characteristics of the oppressor or coloniser. However, the ordered system breaks down if the oppressed—in our example, women—become exactly like the oppressors, men, and the once-desired mimicry turns dangerous. Male characters like Deven and Nur seem to want for sameness, a woman who shares their profound literary aspirations and concerns, much like the colonizer's desired replication. Sarla, contrary to the spiritual yearnings of Deven, seems to aspire for material possessions, in one instance Deven refuses even to go home since he has to face his wife's "stony face, her sulks or her open fury" (IC, 1994, p.65), he knows that having "aspire [d] towards a telephone, a refrigerator, even a car," which magazine ads had assured her could be hers "in easy installments" (IC, 1994, p.67), she is embittered by the poverty she has to endure because of having married a college teacher. In Nur's case, when Deven meets Nur's first wife he admits that probably a man of such literary merits had no other way of choosing a wife who understood him:

It struck Deven as incongruous that he, a college lecturer, should be discussing the quality of Nur's poetry with this old woman cooking in her courtyard, watched by two goats and a child with a squint …Walking away with her crude speech ringing in his ears, so unlike the flowery Urdu spoken upstairs, Deven wondered if this was why the poet had turned from an uneducated country wife to the kind he had upstairs. (IC, 1994, pp.23-126)

Ania Loomba argues that after the independence in post-colonial India real women, though considered symbolic as mother to the nation, are granted limited agency. She em-

phasizes that arguments for women's education in metropolitan as well as colonial contexts are based on the logic that educated women will make better wives and mothers which means that they have to be taught not to overstep their bounds and try to take over authority from men (Loomba, 2005, p.182). Imtiaze's venturing into the world of Urdu poetry is an instance of overstepping the boundaries. Her mimicry turns into derision since Deven and Nur perceive her poetry as a parody of the Urdu poetry tradition. Her mimicry creates a subject whose "not-quite sameness" distorts the male subjects' identities by acting as a distorting mirror. As a result, Deven calls Imtiaz's recitation an "insane whip" and declines to recognise her creative talent:

This woman, this so-called poetess, belonged to that familiar female mafia, he thought, looking at her with unconcealed loathing. She would need only to shed her silver and black carnival costume and take on the drabness of their virtuous clothing. Dressed as she was, she would of course be barred from their society - they would have thought her no better than a prostitute or dancing girl… Why did Nur submit to her insane whim of performing in his house, the house of a poet? (IC, 1994, p. 83)

End of the novel, she writes a letter to Deven asking him to judge her poetry; her letter is an expression of resistance and frustration toward the gendered hierarchies dominating Indian society:

I am enclosing my latest poems for you to read and study and judge if they do not have some merit of their own. Let me see if you are strong enough to face them and admit to their merit. […] I can in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected? Is it not you who has made me play the role of the loose woman in gaudy garments by refusing to take my work seriously and giving me just that much regard that you would extend to even a failure in the arts as long as the artist was male? In this unfair world that you have created what else could I have been but what I am? (IC, 1994, p.196)

Yet again Deven with knowing injustice leaves the poetry unread. His mind is so much preoccupied with Nur's "presence" that he is unwilling and perhaps unable to face a "new presence" like Imtiaz. Thus, Deven ignores her and relegates her to the "grotesque world of hysterics, termagants, viragos, the demented and the outcast" (IC, 1994, p.197).

Imtiaz Begum's situation serves as an example of how mimicry, both in colonial and patriarchal discourse, indicates a flaw in the logic of oppression. It creates ambivalence, which highlights the conflictive nature of patriarchal discourse in general and the unstable nature of the relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed. It also creates room for subversion and the subaltern's reclaiming of agency. Desai aims to challenge the stereotypes associated with "third world women" and the passivity associated with domestic space in the cultural frameworks of once colonised cultures like India through characters like Imtiaz. She seems to be emphasising that while the home may be connected to tyranny, it is not always connected to passivity or unwavering quiet.

Desai succeeds in crafting a marginalised character in Custody who cries out from the edges of the book's main narrative. Imtiaz Begum, Nur's second wife, is shown to be a woman who seeks recognition for her battles against the dominant forces in her life and who seems conscious of them. By showcasing resistance through her outlandish acts, Imtiaz embodies Bhabha's concept of colonial imitation within a gendered framework. Imtiaz succeeds in escaping "the custody" of colonial stereotypes and patriarchal power; she calls for equality for women and acknowledges herself as a deserving "custodian" of her society's rich cultural heritage.

According to Said, Anita Desai's novels demonstrates her "effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalised or suppressed or forgotten histories." (Said, Culture and Imperialism, 1994, p. 216). Desai's appropriation of the master's very tool of oppression (English) as means of articulation − just like Imtiaz's attempt to write poetry in Urdu − reminds us of the transformative power of Language and literature as "source and womb of creativity, a means of giving birth to new stories, new myth, of telling the stories of women that have been previously silenced" (qtd. McLeod, 2002, p.197). Hence, Desai modifies English to allow for new representational frameworks that subaltern women might use to express themselves and escape the "custody" of colonial and patriarchal dominance.

Conclusion

Anita Desai's In Custody offers a compelling exploration of the intersections between gender, colonial legacies, and cultural marginalisation in postcolonial India. Through the character of Imtiaz Begum, Desai disrupts traditional narratives that render women passive or invisible by instead presenting a woman who dares to mimic, subvert, and reclaim the spaces dominated by male authority. Imtiaz's use of language—the very tool of her oppression—becomes an act of resistance, reflecting Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry as both resemblance and menace. While Desai's narrative initially appears to marginalise her female characters, it ultimately uses their peripheral positions as sites of resistance and agency. The novel critiques not only the lingering colonial structures but also the internalised patriarchy that governs post-independence Indian society, revealing that the struggle for identity and voice is ongoing. In this way, In Custody illustrates how the personal and political are deeply entwined, and how women like Imtiaz emerge as subversive figures challenging both colonial and patriarchal custody, thereby redefining what it means to be a subject in a postcolonial world.

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