

Understanding Indian Sensibility in Anita Desai's *In Custody***Ishan Pratap¹**UG Student, Department of English, School of Liberal Education, Galgotias University,
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University, Greater Noida**Article Received:** 02/06/2025**Article Accepted:** 03/07/2025**Published Online:** 03/07/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.07.41

Abstract: Indian sensibility stands for what makes Indians who they are in terms of their beliefs, feelings, and outlook on life. It comes from a lengthy sequence of traditions in history, philosophy, and literature that have changed over hundreds of years—from ancient Vedic civilization and classical Sanskrit aesthetics to Islamic influence, the time spent under British rule, and modern independence. It shows itself as a way of thinking that affects how people look at their experiences, the world around them, their relationships, religious beliefs, and art. Unlike what is found in Western genres, this kind of sensibility depends on feeling, symbols, patterns, and looking at deeper meaning.

Indian sensibility is often shown through Indian Writing in English, making it central to show the country's culture and feelings. Themes such as feeling cut off, loss and erosion of culture, the end of people's languages, looking back fondly, and thoughts on spiritual matters have been used by writers to describe the diverse depth of life in India. Patoshu ideas (such as *Rasa* and *Dhvani*) give direction to the emotion in Indian poetry, and the impact of colonial experiences and different languages leads to a struggle between what is modern and what is traditional. Through the examination of literary, philosophical, and key Indian English writings, this chapter tries to understand Indian sensibility. The novel *In Custody* is studied as an important work that shows the regret of Indian cultural decline and the hardship of finding an identity in a changing India. The way the story is told, characters are developed, and symbolism in language in the novel reveals the complex feelings and disputes common to Indian spiritual beliefs.

This research also considers Indian sensibility to be a flexible idea which is influenced by things like globalization, digitalization, and language politics. As the country undergoes fast modern changes, books and literature still act as a safe space to hold onto,

consider, and reimagine India's traditions. This chapter will explain how Indian literature represents both the emotional and intellectual spirit of India and highlights its history and ongoing social factors. Because of this, Indian sensibility is still a strong and lasting aspect of Indian literature.

Keywords: Indian sensibility, Cultural Identity, Postcolonial Literature, Linguistic Hybridity, Psychological Realism.

Introduction: Indian writers using English reflect both colonial traditions and the richness of India's traditions to enrich the country's culture and literature. This genre is marked by Indian sensibility, which is a particular way to discuss Indian observations, emotions, and worldview, setting Indian writing in English apart from that of Western writers. It refers to the way Indian writers observe, comprehend, and present the world, built over hundreds of years by cultural development, faith, and changes in society and politics.

Here, Indian sensibility is analyzed by looking at its beginnings, its salient points, and how it appears in Indian English literature. The idea comes from established Indian philosophical doctrines and theories from the past. Being influenced by powerful philosophies and traditions, these Indian authors often expressed these values in their stories. Instead of only focusing on appearance, Indian writers use this sensibility to explore important human and cultural concerns (Desai 45).

Questioning themes such as identity, living between cultures, having mixed backgrounds, and preserving tradition against modernity is common for Indian English writers. These themes appear in novels and plays that cover colonial periods and are used by authors to explore the differences between old and new, local and international, and sacred and secular. Where Western literature looks at the power of individual insights, Indian literature is often about societies and their beliefs. Because Indian populations often turn to stories for both entertainment and thinking about larger issues of life, spirituality and daily life are easily mixed in its literature. The growth of Indian English literature began with the nationalist movements happening in India during these centuries. Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, and later R.K. Narayan began writing about Indian traditions and culture in ways that were accepted by world audiences. Rushdie, Roy, and Ghosh are also found in this trend, using both postcolonial ideas and knowledge from their local cultures. Indian myths, memories, and community experiences many share inspire the writing of these writers (Narayan 808).

In India, language plays a central role and heavily affects how people feel. Many Indian writers in English use mixing and blend traditional language and sayings to express the feeling and character of their traditional culture. Instead of being confusing, this style of

language actually helps Indian authors share how life really is in the country. Cases like these demonstrate that Indian philosophy is able to absorb new backgrounds while remaining identifiably Indian.

Also, in India, *samskara* proves how backgrounds and past events shape a person's actions and life. A sense of this belief appears in novels, because main characters tend to be thoughtful, controlled in feeling, and heavily influenced by the values, religion, and culture around them. Anita Desai and Raja Rao look at the emotional hardships of their characters which result from personal experiences and the environment around them. Many writers draw attention to being in a particular place, the blurry nature of right and wrong, and characters in search of spiritual advice (Rao 348).

Literature Review: Interest and study in Indian sensibility in literature have spread across literary studies, cultural theory, postcolonial studies, and comparative literature. Many experts have focused on finding what specifically characterizes an Indian vision or literary method when expressed in English, which was once shaped by colonial influence. What this discourse mainly aims to explain is how Indian writers deal with the rules of their own culture and the English writing tradition. As a result of this negotiation, critics state that the author forms an Indian sensibility which fuses Indian thoughts and emotions with a global literary style.

He was intimately involved in showing people the richness of Indian narrative traditions. It was pointed out that the traditions, memories, and cultural context give shape and meaning to stories from India. In Ramanujan's essays, he described how Indian thinkers regularly approach life through stories with roots in family, community, and culture, and these stories tend to cycle, have deep meaning, and are hard to follow in a logical order (Rao 377). As opposed to Western movies that have a linear and individual story, Asian movies focus more on collective events. He showed how aspects such as folklore, myth, and oral storytelling deeply influence Indian literature to make it both close to the reader and quite comprehensive.

In his book *Indian Writing in English* (1962), K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar highlighted traits that make Indian English literature different from English literature written elsewhere. The aesthetic theories of *Rasa* (essence or flavor of emotion) and *Dhvani* (suggestion or resonance) were first established in classical Sanskrit poetics. These theories have also undergone modern revisions in literary critiquing and are used as intellectual tools for understanding how Indian expressive forms operate. These theories foreground emotional engagement, suggestiveness, and multivalence—essential components of an Indian literary sensibility. Indian literature, at both ends of the age spectrum, engages in literature that is characterized by indirection over explication, emotion over plot, suggestion over declarative, and the dimensions of our contributions as readers lie in interpretation.

Postcolonial theorization has added a political and philosophical dimension to the Indian sensibility discourse. Scholars such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have explored the implications of how colonial histories affect postcolonial identities and expressive forms (Spivak 278). The notion of hybridity proposed by Bhabha is especially useful in terms of making sense of Indian English literature, as both native traditions and colonial histories combine to form a third space of cultural negotiations. Bhabha suggests colonized and formerly colonized societies can unify and subvert colonial discursive authority by hybridizing it with indigenous knowledge systems (Bhabha 708). The nature of Indian English, signified by the accepted model of English and from a position of being culturally Indian, reflects this.

In this vast academic landscape, Anita Desai stands out as a truly important voice whose writings speak to the Indian sensibility. Desai's fictional corpus is often characterized as psychologically rich, introspective in tone, and culturally French. For instance, Meenakshi Mukherjee, who has written extensively about Desai, has described Desai's novels as significant departures in Indian English literature because they do not begin with ideas of nation-building and previous histories; rather, they center on inner psychological journeys and personal crises (Desai 155). Mukherjee describes Nakul, Desai's protagonist in the novel *Clear Light of Day*, as "in between, hesitant, anxious" about modernity and tradition, silence and speaking, withdrawal and responsiveness. When Mukherjee illustrates Desai's characters as caught between tradition and modernity, silence and speech, withdrawal and responsiveness, they evoke a fractured but resilient core of Indian sensibility.

Jasbir Jain, another prominent voice in Indian literary criticism, examines Desai's writing through the lenses of gendered identities and emotional profundities. Jain argues that Desai's female protagonists in particular navigate a unique emotional reality; they experience dilemmas of emotional alienation, cultural legacies, and suffocation linked to male patriarchy or at least with a gender code. But Desai does not position these women merely as victims. The protagonists inhabit the headspace of inquiry and internal journeys. As a result, along with the realization that Desai works in a socio-cultural milieu that is distinctly Indian, the tone is engagement with disembodied sentiments that find universality in emotional terms.

In terms of novels, Desai's *In Custody* (1984) has received a lot of good scholarship. The narrative is about a small-town Hindi lecturer, Deven Sharma, who waxes poetic on Urdu poetry and has been asked to conduct an interview with one of India's last remaining Urdu poets, Nur. So far, scholars have studied *In Custody* through a variety of academic lenses, including researched critiques on language politics, decay of culture, idealism vs. realism, and postcolonial identity crisis in the last fifty years. *In Custody* depicts the disintegration of traditional literary culture (and of Urdu literature specifically) in the current atmosphere of modernization and political disengagement (Desai 159).

In addition, Desai's approach to spaces—especially cities and the domestic sphere, whether in *Clear Light of Day*, *Fire on the Mountain*, or *Fasting, Feasting*—demonstrates a

sensibility that is both intimate and universal, which is unique to Desai and increasingly familiar in contemporary literary discourse. She understands the power of silence as a means of communication, which is an unmistakably Indian cultural feature. Silence in Indian culture can be a form of communication, where tensions exist underneath the subdued surface in public situations where feelings are not overtly expressed. The setting of Delhi, small towns, or indefinable distant homes are symbolic extensions of her characters' interior worlds.

So, the scholarship on Indian sensibility is endless and multivalent and involves the interplay of classical aesthetics, contemporary literary criticism, diverse embodiments of postcolonial theory, and psychological analyses. Writers such as Anita Desai embody Indian sensibility, as their craft draws on extensive traditions in a quintessential Indian way found in numerous national traditions and stories. But they also reinvent it through their intricacies of story.

Methodology: This research employs a **qualitative literary analysis** to explore the presence and representation of *Indian sensibility* in Indian Writing in English (IWE), with a primary focus on Anita Desai's *In Custody* (Desai 44). Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from literary criticism, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory, the study engages both thematically and formally with the text—examining its style, structure, symbolism, and language use—to trace Indian sensibility across narrative and theoretical dimensions.

Given that Indian sensibility is a layered and evolving concept embedded within historical, philosophical, and socio-political contexts, the research unfolds in **five interrelated stages**:

1. Historical-Cultural Contextualization: The first stage involves a reflective understanding of Indian sensibility within its **historical and cultural evolution**. This stage lays the groundwork for comprehending how Indian aesthetics, emotion, and imagination have been shaped by:

- **Vedic and Classical Indian philosophies:** The Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Sanskrit drama and poetics introduced aesthetic systems such as **Rasa** (emotive essence) and **Dhvani** (suggestion), emphasizing emotional response and layered meaning.
- **Buddhist, Islamic, and Sufi influences:** The integration of Persian and Islamic literary traditions introduced motifs of mysticism, longing, and introspection, contributing to a composite Indian literary ethos (Desai 87).
- **Colonial legacies:** British educational institutions propagated English as a literary medium while instilling a sense of cultural inferiority. This colonial-modern tension created a dynamic field in which Indian writers began negotiating between tradition and modernity, the native and the colonial.

2. Thematic Features: This stage identifies **recurring literary themes** that reflect Indian sensibility in IWE. These include:

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- **Character development and emotional experience:** How characters express conflict, growth, or fragmentation reveals broader cultural and psychological patterns.
 - **Contours of conflict:** Literary tensions often reflect deeper oppositions such as tradition vs. modernity, spiritual vs. bureaucratic life, or personal idealism vs. institutional apathy.

3. Prospects for Future Research: This phase outlines **potential research trajectories**, especially concerning:

- **Changing socio-literary contexts:** As globalization, modernization, and digitalization transform literary production and readership, future research may focus on how these shifts influence expressions of Indian sensibility.
- **The role of emotion, collective memory, and psychology:** For example, Anita Desai's characters—particularly Deven Sharma—embody introspective emotional states reflective of both individual and collective cultural trauma.
 - **Imagery and symbolism:** Elements such as broken relationships, crumbling homes, and disused languages (e.g., Urdu) symbolically depict emotional and cultural loss.

4. Theoretical Integration: This phase involves applying **critical theories** to deepen the interpretive scope:

A) Postcolonial Theory

- **Edward Said's Orientalism:** Illuminates how colonial narratives distort or romanticize Indian culture.
- **Homi Bhabha's Hybridity:** Useful for understanding the third space between Indian and Western cultural identities, especially in Deven's conflicted relationship with Urdu poetry (Bhabha 725).
- **Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern Studies:** Explores silenced voices and gendered absences within Desai's narrative (Spivak 301).

B) Classical Indian Aesthetics

- **Rasa** (e.g., *Karuna*, *Shanta*): Analyzing emotional moods that permeate the text.
- **Dhvani:** Allows for uncovering implicit meaning and emotional suggestion beneath surface language.

C) Indian Literary Criticism

- Scholars such as **K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar**, **Meenakshi Mukherjee**, and **Jasbir Jain** offer frameworks to interpret culturally embedded emotional and philosophical subtexts specific to Indian English literature.

Analysis and Discussion: Indian sensibility represents a distinctive emotional, philosophical, and aesthetic orientation rooted in India's cultural worldview. It encompasses a mode of perception shaped by centuries of spiritual tradition, collective memory, and symbolic meaning. In Indian Writing in English (IWE), this sensibility becomes both a lens and a literary strategy—providing emotional depth, non-linear structures, and a nuanced cultural critique. This section examines how Anita Desai's *In Custody* embodies Indian sensibility, particularly through its treatment of cultural contestation, hybridized language, introspective spirituality, and symbolic narration.

At the heart of Indian sensibility lies a particular emotional density and symbolic resonance, articulated through the classical aesthetic principles of **Rasa** and **Dhvani**. These concepts foreground emotional suggestion, subtlety, and cyclicity—offering a contrast to Western literary traditions, which often prioritize linear plots, individualism, and empirical clarity. In *In Custody*, Desai draws upon these Indian traditions to depict Deven Sharma's psychological struggle—not primarily as external failure, but as an **internal crisis of cultural identity**, emotional longing, and spiritual disconnection (Desai 11). The narrative is slow, introspective, and symbolically charged—hallmarks of Indian literary tradition.

Two core themes—**cultural disintegration** and **language loss**—dominate Desai's novel and reflect the broader postcolonial Indian experience. Deven's ambition to interview the Urdu poet Nur is not merely an academic task; it represents a desperate attempt to preserve a **disappearing cultural legacy**. Urdu, once a symbol of aesthetic refinement, is here shown as eclipsed by a more pragmatic, politically favored Hindi. Deven, an emotionally invested Hindi lecturer with a heart steeped in Urdu poetry, embodies the **fragmentation and hybridity** of Indian sensibility: nostalgic, spiritually conflicted, and intellectually marginalized.

Desai extends this emotional and cultural rupture through rich **symbolism**. Nur's decaying home—chaotic, noisy, and filthy—acts not only as a setting but as a **metaphor for India's neglect of its literary and artistic memory** (Desai 193). Similarly, Deven's malfunctioning tape recorder and lack of institutional support underscore the systemic apathy toward cultural preservation. These failures are more than material; they signify a **larger spiritual collapse**, conveyed not through overt melodrama but through **narrative silence, psychological strain, and symbolic stillness**.

Silence, in particular, is a key expressive mode in Desai's literary landscape. Indian culture often assigns deep meaning to **what remains unsaid**, valuing pause, stillness, and restraint as forms of dignity and resistance. In *In Custody*, Deven's unspoken emotions, awkward pauses, and abandoned monologues articulate an **emotionally intelligent and culturally embedded psyche**. These silences become **sites of agency and resilience**, not merely gaps in conversation (Anand 78). Through such understated narration, Desai constructs a psychological realism rooted not just in individual suffering but in **historical memory and collective trauma**.

Memory—both individual and collective—is central to Desai's rendering of Indian sensibility. In *IWE*, memory frequently functions as an act of **resistance rather than simple nostalgia**. For Deven, the memory of Urdu poetry is not only aesthetic but spiritual and existential. Nur, despite being physically and morally decayed, remains a **symbol of artistic purity** and lost wisdom. He is a relic of a philosophical and poetic past whose fading presence evokes both **hope and despair**. The novel's emotional landscape is shaped by this oscillation—between reverence and disillusionment, between sacredness and abandonment. Desai's characters are not isolated psychological portraits but **representations of broader cultural and historical crises**. Deven, as a failed academic and idealist, exemplifies the **postcolonial Indian intellectual**, torn between inward longing and outward ineffectiveness. He reflects the paralysis of a class caught between tradition and bureaucratic modernity, unable to reconcile introspection with the demands of transactional efficiency.

Indian sensibility, as portrayed in *In Custody*, is also **hybrid and postcolonial**. Homi Bhabha's concept of **hybridity** is crucial here: the novel occupies a "third space," neither fully colonial nor purely indigenous. English—the very language in which the novel is written—functions paradoxically: it is the **colonial medium used to express postcolonial pain** over the loss of indigenous language (Bhabha 798). This **double displacement**—of language and culture—creates a complex emotional and symbolic terrain, making Indian sensibility a site of tension, confusion, and philosophical inquiry (Desai 111).

Moreover, Desai's use of **allegorical character construction**, influenced by both classical Indian epics and contemporary trauma, offers a literary space where **symbolism, psychology, and social critique converge**. Indian sensibility, in this framework, is not a fixed tradition but an evolving emotional register—shaped by **globalization, institutional failure, and cultural commodification**.

Deven's failure is not solely personal; it is a **cultural and institutional failure**. In a world where universities, journals, and literary platforms have lost their spiritual mission and become transactional, *In Custody* mourns the **bureaucratization of cultural life**. This degradation of value is a recurring theme in *IWE* (Anand 134). Yet, Desai insists that the **acts of remembering, recording, and deeply feeling** remain vital—even when confronted with inertia and despair.

Conclusion: The study of Indian sensibility in Indian Writing in English, especially through Anita Desai's *In Custody*, underscores the depth, multiplicity, and complexity of India's cultural, emotional, and philosophical landscapes. Indian sensibility is shaped by centuries-old traditions, refracted through the colonial encounter, and continually transformed by the forces of globalization and digital modernity. It emerges as a visceral, intellectual, and emotional worldview—capable of moving beyond simplistic binaries such as tradition versus modernity, or East versus West.

This research has demonstrated that Indian literature is not merely a vehicle for storytelling, but a profound medium for **cultural memory**, **identity negotiation**, and **emotional introspection**. Whether expressed through foundational aesthetic principles like *rasa* and *dhvani*, or through postcolonial concepts such as **hybridity**, **language politics**, **collective consciousness**, and **spiritual longing**, Indian sensibility permeates the thematic and narrative structures of the literary text.

Anita Desai's engagement with Indian sensibility is revealed through her exploration of **interior emotional worlds**, **silences**, and the **fragmented identities** of characters suspended between competing cultural frameworks. Her use of **symbolism**, **spatial metaphors**, and **psychological realism** underscores the view that Indian sensibility is not a static essence but a dynamic process—a movement across interstitial spaces between the past and present, the local and the global.

Indian sensibility, therefore, functions both as a critical lens and a literary force. It positions literature as a mirror of societal tension and transformation, while also serving as a reservoir for a continuously evolving Indian consciousness. More than a tool for interpretation, it is a mode of **being, feeling, and remembering**. Ultimately, Indian sensibility sustains the relevance of Indian literature in English as both a **national expression and a universal human articulation**—rooted in place, yet expansive in its philosophical and emotional reach.

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