

**Tradition Versus Modernity in Anita Desai's *In Custody*****Ishan Pratap<sup>1</sup>**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.2025.18.07.60

**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to investigate the thematic tension between tradition and modernity in Anita Desai's *In Custody* with regard to cultural fragmentation, institutional neglect, and materialism in post-independence India. Desai creates a powerful story illustrating the demise of Urdu poetry, a previously prestigious cultural art, through her main characters, Nur and Deven, where Deven attempts to resurrect culture and restore poetic art. Nur, an elderly, disappointed Urdu poet, implies a wealth of cultural heritage while dying a slow death with it, and Deven, a meek college professor, serves to reinforce how cultural tradition is struggling to persist amidst increasing values placed on pragmatic, materialistic ideals.

Desai critiques modern institutions that hinder, instead of empower, cultural preservation, and instead makes it as bureaucratically indivisible from ideological collapse. Desai emphasizes the physical structures, such as Nur's rotting abode, as well as the ubiquitous anxiety of modern institutional structures, by emphasising the stunting habitus of Deven's academic fraternity. As modernity permeates the human psyche, it limits individual aspiration, hinders personal context, and defeats cultural cohesion. Ideology becomes a political weapon of monstrous transformation, destroying human relationships, corrupting human emotions, and enfeebling artistic values by introducing capitalist motives and self-interest.

The article has shown through detailed textual analysis that Desai's character arcs and settings signify a society in flux — a society moving away from its intellectual and spiritual terminus during a time of secular utilitarianism. In conclusion, *In Custody* proposes an inquiry into loss: language, art, and identity. By expressing cultural and emotional disintegration, Desai not only critiques modernity's state of being, but also laments the loss of what will not be saved.

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**Keywords:** Tradition and Modernity, Cultural Fragmentation, Institutional Failure, Literary Criticism, Urdu Literature Decline.

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**Introduction:** In Anita Desai's culturally astute narrative of modern India, *In Custody*, we see a subtle yet powerful critique of where India stands in the arc of history's trajectory. The novel reveals a society attempting to navigate a space between its glorious past and a rapidly modernizing present, a societal configuration of ambiguity and instability. Placed in post-independence India, the novel lays bare how these spatio-temporal realities were affecting formerly thriving literary and artistic traditions, and how powerful men, bureaucracies, materialism, and monopolistic oil industries were forcing their impressive weight down upon these traditions (Desai 12). At the center of this narrative incongruity sits the couplet of the stories of two protagonists—Deven Sharma, a humble Hindi lecturer with a fondness for the Urdu language, and Nur Shahjenabadi, a faded Urdu literary festival participant who was once a world-famous poet but now sits about in a life filled with the ugly realities of modernity and life responsibilities, exiling his poetic mind into a state of oblivion.

*In Custody* is set in Mirpore and, at the end of the novel, in Delhi; each city serves as a metaphorical site of cultural ebbed continuation and, later, urban modernity filled with chaos to contrasting effect, symbolizing the varied means of preserving Urdu poetry as well as Deven's couched hope for preservation and continuance. Deven's emotions of certain cultural hope when pursuing the interview with Nur do specify the loss of cultural preservation in the pursuit, yet there is space in the literature; because of Deven's mind making sense of things in terms of glory and higher-order features of the world, an interview alleviates at least the nihilistic and cognitive dissonance which gypsied Deven's mind, if only a brief interlude of joy perceiving pleasures that were house-made in Nur's lethargy (Desai 28).

The novel's thematic importance relating to the conflict between tradition and modernity demonstrates how cultural erosion affects those individuals who still choose to fight for lost causes, psychologically and emotionally. Deven, who has an idealistic view of the world and is of introverted nature, finds himself increasingly alienated on both a professional and personal level as he tries to manage his academic responsibilities while he seeks a romanticized vision of immortalizing Nur's words. The institutions that should be supportive of the work, including the college's responsibility and the publishing press, are demonstrated to be ineffective, uninterested, and at worst, complicit in the cultural deterioration process (Dharwadker 768). Desai critiques the bureaucratic red tape of the institutions that often stifle authentic intellectual pursuits in postcolonial India.

While not overtly stating so, the novel also demonstrates the linguistic politics of the time period. While Urdu is in decline, being associated with an elite, refined, and sometimes Muslim identity, Hindi is gaining momentum as the dominant language associated with a populist, nationalist project. Deven's positioning as a Hindi lecturer who wants to express

himself through Urdu poetry accentuates the contradiction between imposed obligations and self-identity (Kumar 189). Deven's attempt to take his imposed obligations and marry them to his own self-identity is unsuccessful not just materially, but he incurs personal embarrassment and emotional defeat, drawing attention to the futility of attempting to curtail a culture that society has chosen not to value.

Desai's writing offers a mix of irony and compassion, with a restrained mode of narration that highlights the absurdity of institutional frameworks and the quiet tragedies of the lives of her characters. Using rich imagery, layered characters, and fully realized settings, she creates a narrative that mourns the loss of cultural legitimacy in a modernization-obsessed world of convenience. *In Custody* is a literary lament—an elegy for an expiring language and neglected customs, and the people charged with keeping it but offered little care or support, and not even respect (Desai 45).

This paper will seek to demonstrate how Desai asserts the duality of post-independence India—celebrated for its political triumphs but complicit in allowing showers of disintegration of its rich life of artistic and literary heritage. Through both Deven and Nur as cultural metaphors, this study examines how *In Custody* illustrates the tenuousness of culture in the prescribed familiarity and blindness of the apathetic modernity around it, and how that tenuousness is actualized within public institutions and personal lives.

**Literature Review:** *In Custody* often highlights Anita Desai's heartfelt lament for the decline of Urdu and the increasing estrangement of intellectuals in postcolonial India. The novel is generally seen as a literary reflection about the deterioration of cultural identity in a society where modernization is often a euphemism for the abandonment of legacy. Scholars emphasize that Desai did not just tell a personal anecdote but articulated broader cultural commentary by way of declining characters and settings (Desai 67). As Rai (2001) notes, the tragic decline of Nur Shahjenedadi, a once-respected Urdu poet, mirrors the disintegration of those cultural institutions that tended to grant poets the status of sages and cultural guardians, custodians of community memory (Rai 51).

Desai herself, in interviews and other discussions, has drawn attention to the metaphorical import within imagery in the novel. Nur's disintegrating home and his feeble, decomposing body are strong metaphors of a once-glorious literary past now in ruins and disrepair (Desai 89). These physical spaces are not only narrative environments/settings but also representations of the heritage modern India has chosen to forget. As Desai observes, "The poet's body, like his house, was in disrepair." The poet clearly represented not only himself, but the culture he inhabited.

In recent months, many critics have drawn attention to the extent of institutional failure depicted in the novel. It is one thing for an institution to be indifferent to the work of cultural preservation; it is quite another to obstruct that work, but the bureaucracy, academia, and publishing demonstrate both. In his academic role, the depictions of Deven's

environment cannot be more stifling and unsupportive; not only does he suffer ridicule, particularly from his colleagues, for his academic pursuits, but institutional structures provide no support for the project. The bureaucracy, instead of furthering documentation of Urdu's last living voice, mired Deven in paperwork, poor financial support, and the absurdity of academia (Desai 134).

Desai also critiques a rising materialism and its damaging effects on intellectual and spiritual life. Nur's admirers and hangers-on can be understood as more concerned with their previous privileges catalyzed by his artistic genius than with an investment in their worth (and the artist in question). This opportunism cheapens the art and maintains a culture that prizes the acquisition of wealth over wisdom. Deven, too, found his yearning stifled, not only by these systems, but by his own hesitations and regrets born from the entrenched social and economic surroundings of poor and impoverished communities. Thus, she connects personal despair and disappointment to the larger malaise; Desai is not taking an easy shot at the author's and artist's role in society (and is, in fact, critiquing the society that neglects its artists, languages, and traditions for the dollar) (Desai 145).

**Methodology:** This research makes use of a qualitative literary method rooted in interpretive textual analysis and contextual analysis to examine the main thematic contention in Anita Desai's *In Custody*. The thematic focus is on cultural fragmentation, institutional erosion, and the cultural predominance of materialism in Indian society since independence. The intention of this investigation is to examine how these habitual themes are constituted and concretized through the employment of literary devices, the elements of character, and the narrative form.

The primary material for analysis consists of the novel itself, alongside secondary empirical sources gathered from academic criticism, big theoretical fields, and cultural histories of postcolonial India. The analysis does not present numerical data. Instead, it pursues depth of meaning through interpretative reading, thematic categorization, and theoretical framing. In this way, the inquiry can examine the cultural, ideological, and institutional forces that lie beneath the literary representation of *In Custody* (Desai 56).

**1. Research Design & Approach:** The research design is interpretive and analytical; the outcome is based on a close reading of the novel. The approach is not premised upon something to be formally tested, but to collectively explore the meanings, themes, and consequent symbolic structures that resonate from the reading of the story. The analytical approach uses inductive logic; the analysis looks for patterns in recurring thematic elements, character behaviours, and narrative settings. It categorises these patterns and develops theoretical shapes through each investigation (Kumar 198). This method offers an avenue to explore the latent critiques within the text that concern language politics, artistic decline, and socio-cultural shifts at the time of post-Independence India.

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The study also accords with the hermeneutic method, whereby the text is considered not as an isolated text alone but as an ideological and cultural product made in a particular historical and economic moment. This provides an opportunity to investigate how the literary work relates to and responds to conditions of its time. The aim will be to interpret how the novel's themes are activated through narrative form and socio-political context.

**2. Textual Analysis Process:** The first part of the methodological process included several readings of the primary text in order to make the researcher familiar with its narrative construction, style, and structure. This was useful for identifying significant themes related to decay, alienation, bureaucracy, and cultural tension. The analysis was built around literary features, which include:

- Narrative voice and tone
- Language choices and diction
- Descriptions of space and setting
- Characterizations of central figures
- Dialogues that convey ideological positions

We examined each of these elements in order to understand how they contribute to representing postcolonial cultural deterioration. For example, the use of spatial imagery was analyzed to investigate how material spaces impart metaphoric meanings about the state of language, art, and institutional decay. The narrative structure, naturally somewhat meandering and observational, was read for reflections on time, memory, and the decline of cultural values (Dharwadker 781).

Attention was also paid to literary devices, and arguably most important to Desai's devices and aesthetic style were irony, symbolism, and metaphor. The interplay or interrelationship between the literary devices and the narrative concerns of the novel was considered as well to determine how the novel expresses feelings of despair, futility, and resistance to the loss of culture.

**3. Contextual and Theoretical Framework:** In addition to textual analysis, the study included contextual analysis, which located the novel in a wider discourse of postcolonial studies, Indian cultural history, and language politics. This secondary aspect of the study's methodology draws on critical theorists and cultural commentators who have examined the postcolonial consequences of colonialism, modernization, and institutional constraints in formerly colonized countries.

Theoretical frameworks from postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Gauri Viswanathan, Aijaz Ahmad, and G.N. Devy were incorporated to analyze the conflicts of identity, language, and cultural memory. These perspectives provide insight into the ideological and structural dimensions that inform Desai's critique of modernity and cultural erosion. Theories of hybridity, marginalization, and the politics of linguistic nationalism provide readings of characters and locales in the novel (Nayar 123).

The historical moment where the novel operates, specifically the decades following India's independence in 1947, is central to the analysis. This was a pivotal moment in India's history following the independence movement, characterized by major cultural transformations and realignment of political power and social access. This also included discussions around national language policy, the formalization of Hindi, and the exclusionary or marginalizing politics of Urdu (Dharwadker 801). These historical forces, along with future historical trajectories, are necessary to consider the symbolic and narrative meaning of the decline of Urdu poetry as represented by Nur, and the ideological confusion represented in Deven.

**4. Character and Motif-Based Categorization:** There is a way in which the characters of the novel do not only serve as narrative agents but also as symbols representing larger socio-cultural realities. The study takes a character-based approach; here, the prominent characters are conceptualized as representations of institutional and systemic failure, cultural nostalgia, and psychological disintegration.

Deven Sharma is understood as a representation of the marginal intellectual, overwhelmed with academic constraints and idealized aspirations, while Nur Shahjenabadi signifies a dying remembrance of artistic demise through social and economic stagnation. Their interconnections and trajectories allow us to recognize important insights into the demise of mentorship, the failure of institutional custodians, and generational disconnection. These insights, and others, are then shown to reinforce allegorical concerns and expose internalized costs associated with cultural collapse.

Motifs observed, like physical decay, misuse of communication, and bureaucracy stifling unaccommodating action, are likewise noted and theorized across the text. These motifs have been considered literary constants that belong to the *fin de siècle* atmosphere of the novel as well as its moral architecture. Their recurrence and evolution through the narrative should be understood as representative of a culture suspended between memory and powerlessness.

**5. Triangulation and Validation:** Even though the methodology is qualitative, our research draws from triangulation through the inclusion of primary textual analysis (of the novel), secondary theoretical perspectives (predominantly Bourdieu), and historical contextualization. Thus, our interpretations do not rely solely on meaning from personal impressions, but rather they are grounded in established scholarly discussion. By placing commentary gained from context revealed in the text alongside theoretical positions and contextual benchmarks, the adventure in understanding here is validated, along with new commentary, by providing a qualitative reading of the novel (Dharwadker 793).

Critical reviews, journal articles, and scholarly essays are used to cross-reference interpretations and provide necessary depth and legitimacy to the conclusions. These sources

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are not treated as authorities in and of themselves but critically enacted as an enhancement to the primary textual analysis and more founded in a larger intellectual tradition regarding the novel.

**Analysis and Discussion:** This section is concerned with revealing how *In Custody* exposes the emotional and cultural decay of a changing India. Anita Desai uses her characters, scenes, and tone to look at what happens when tradition clashes with a world seemingly motivated by institutions and materialism.

**1. Cultural Disintegration:** In *In Custody*, Anita Desai artfully crafts a story depicting the decline of culture through the disruption of both language and generations. At the heart of this cultural disintegration is the symbolic erasure of Urdu as a significant language of poetry and elite culture. Desai's treatment of Nur, a once-celebrated Urdu poetic figure, conveys that that which is not cared for by the communities and societies adapting to change is forgotten. Nur, like in the case of language culture, is in a house and body that are rotting. Nur's decline and decay function as an extended metaphor for a culture that has been neglected, marginalised, and cast aside. The decay of the Urdu poetic culture reflects a national loss of connectivity to its intellectual and artistic legacy.

This cultural neglect is constructed by Desai in a quiet and understated way that nonetheless conveys its brutality. The decline of Nur's physical and emotional state parallels that of the cultural tradition he symbolizes. His words, which were once powerful in a world marked by indifference, are now diminished by the lack of sustaining reverence (Desai 190). Desai does not idealize the past; she laments its loss in a world that no longer has the patience or respect to engage seriously with the profound capacity of poetic contemplation. His poetry is implicated in a loss of audience, and nothing sustains poetic depth in a world that is ever more impatient and indifferent. The intergenerational divide is palpable in Deven's clumsy attempts to revive this tradition, and the tools and allies he lacks diminish the cultural continuity evolving from poetic thinking during a period when none of this is relevant anymore.

Deven's plight as the inheritor of culture shines through as a story that is somehow doomed to futility. He emerges, caught between acknowledgement and helplessness, forced to face down the idealistic dreams of preserving a culture and an irreplaceable tradition in the future in the crippling demands of modern institutional life. He is emotionally tethered to the beauty of Urdu culture and severed by bureaucratized, internalized constraints. He cannot escape the realization that whatever he does to station a new vision for poetry in an institutional setting has nothing meaningfully cemented behind it, which is compounded by an inability to capture, publish, and market Nur's petrified thinking in Urdu poetry. The emptiness of paper, ink, and time becomes a reflection of broader post-independence Indian society's failure to protect and curate the same scraps of cultural inheritances it already had as markers of linguistic and physical cultures. There is no transmission of pride in these collective cultural inheritances for Desai; there is disconnection, mistranslation, and

transference of pristine pasts in this modernity and indecipherable, halted bureaucracies (Raghavan 48).

Desai's representation of cultural loss is not merely about the death of a language—it is about loss of meaning, of belonging, of identity. As a society that is continually moving toward utility and productivity, there is a diminishing spiritual and emotional value awarded to art. In the interaction between Deven and Nur, Desai provides a bitter lament for a culture that no longer has space in contemporary ambition. The inability to preserve Urdu becomes a potent symbol of India's larger detachment from its pluralistic, syncretic intellectualism.

**2. The Role of Institutions:** The critique of institutional structures is unsparing, visceral, and often ruthless. Desai does not portray the university system, publishing houses, and academic societies as harbors of learning and cultural preservation, but as stagnant, self-serving, and bureaucratic systems. Rather than promote intellectual engagement, these institutions resist and deride it. The college where Deven teaches is characterized as disinterested in his interests, as if he is merely another cog in a mechanical system where theoretical obligation, political interests, red tape, and careerism are all that pertain to academic pursuit.

Not only is Deven's ambition to spend time documenting Nur's life and poetry met with entrenched obstacles before he even arrives at the university, his department is apathetic to the potential for course credit or publicity, offers him no funding, and does not advocate for his interest, which is met with jeers by his colleagues.

The university becomes a symbol of postcolonial inertia, where aspirations for genuine cultural means are smothered by administrative encumbrance, and real cultural projects are starved of vital resources. Journals that once engaged with literature are now unwilling to accept work that does not fit market goals or ideological fads. Desai ironically uses this to represent an ominous reality: India's intellectual institutions, after independence and looking to preserve the valuable nuances of the various cultural traditions in India, have instead become enablers of an amnesic forgetting that has value in itself.

And if this institutional malaise is confined to the academic sphere, the publishing industry has also become implicated in the corruption of profit and lack of vision—an industry of intellectual exchange (Gopal 69). Desai offers a stunning representation: editors and publishers now only use intellectual values when they hold the promise of monetary return, scrapping projects of potential historical or literary value. Knowledge is treated as a commodity, and cultural worth is accounted for in terms of financial value, not intellectual contribution.

Not only this, but institutional failure also extends to the students and younger generations, who demonstrate little interest or appreciation for the cultural capital of the Urdu language. The dislocation of youth from the heritage of their linguistic identity represents a

confused ideological position; practical over poetic mindsets and convenience over reflective thought have become the new cultural benchmarks. The lack of curiosity, coupled with the cultural malfeasance of institutions, creates an apathetic threat. In Desai's depiction, institutions that are meant to impact and safeguard national consciousness are now complicit in its blurring.

**3. The Rise of Materialism:** The novel is critical not only of the institutions but also of the evident shift toward materialism and consumerism as a society. The narrative depicts how intellectualism is being slowly replaced with financial gain. While materialism in *In Custody* does not convey just the thirst for money, it illustrates the idea that materialism is an issue that threatens to dismantle art's values, spiritual vitality, and human relations. Desai suggests that materialism is an "ideology" that invades all levels of the social and cultural environment (Raghavan 51).

This shift is represented in Nur's bed, a space that Deven once imagined as a poet's haven, which has become chaotic, unjust, and now runs on questions of financial disputes and corruption. The poet's followers are no longer followers of his art, but rather of his power, using Nur's aura to leverage a material advantage through his presence in literature. Nur's world of respect and sophisticated aesthetics has changed into a crude reality where art offers neither intellectual nor emotional value, but instead, is presented for status and material advantage.

Deven's motivation to interview and preserve Nur's poetry, originally grounded in cultural reverence, is quickly eclipsed by tangible challenges—broken-down cameras, rigid budgets, and people's unwillingness to help unless paid to do so. What had been an intellectual and emotional endeavor of cultural preservation has quickly become a logistical failure mired in the structures of capitalism. Somewhere along the journey of grant applications, artist fees, and minor disputing issues, the spiritual dignity of documenting history has vanished (Raghavan 59).

This kind of satire regarding failed preservation of culture through a material ontology lies at the core of Desai's lament. In Deven's repeated failures, she illustrates the growing fracture between society's espoused respect for tradition and the actual unwillingness to fund it. Art as a commodity provides cultural memory and signifies not only memory but a remainder—valuable only when profitable; otherwise, a wasteful inconvenience (Gopal 43).

Desai's narrative voice in parts of the text is quiet and elegiac. She does not dramatize the conflict but allows the sad squandering of values to present itself. The juxtaposition of Deven's good intentions and the loss of values created by the negative forces he encounters becomes a keen critique of a society that has sold its spirit for mere contact.

**Conclusion:** In Anita Desai's *In Custody* we have a poignant elegy for a disappearing culture, articulating the tensions between the remnants of culture and tradition, spiritually rich but materialist aspiration, cultural memory, and bureaucratic indifference. In creating the character of Deven, the meek Hindi lecturer who idolizes and hopelessly struggles to bring some honor back to a lost era of Urdu poems, Desai places the reader in a world where the arts are no longer valued but treated as relics of some bygone era. The conflict in the novel could be thought of as being linguistic or literary in nature, but in fact, it is nihilistic to its core. Desai's views suggest that the loss of tradition is not simply a loss of form or style—it is loss of identity, loss of community, loss of soul. Nur, a venerated figure in literature, now left to rot, literally and emotionally, reflects the dilapidation of not simply Nur but of the entire culture he represents. Deven's failure to sustain Nur's voice is not a failure of intent; it is a failure of institutions that neglect to proffer the supports needed, whether that is universities, cultural institutions, friends, or academic colleagues. At its most symbolic, impotent idealism highlights that modern institutions rarely preserve culture; instead, they help hasten its end. Desai does not provide a pedagogical option. Instead, she describes the slow wash of art death by way of time and money, when the ability to think and feel slowly erodes over time.

The novel is as much a story about failed academics as it is a lament for the broad failure of a society to appreciate its own traditions for their inherent value. This failure is collective: in a university system, a university system that fails to provide any grant support for Deven, in any set of friends or colleagues who dismiss Deven's commitment to a Janet Rogers as naively practical, and in Deven's students, a generation who has simply accepted an ideology of profit over poetry. Ultimately, *In Custody* serves as a stark reminder that cultural heritage does not exist on belief—it must be recognised and lived through, in resistance to homogenisation through consumer choice or institutional inertia. *In Custody* asks readers to be aware that once a culture loses its language, its stories—and its poets—this culture risks losing its soul.

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