

A Study of Indian Sensibility in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

1.Mansi Jaiswal

UG Student, Department of English, School of Liberal Education, Galgotias University,
Greater Noida

2.Dr. Kishan Mishra

Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Liberal Education, Galgotias
University, Greater Noida

Article Received: 07/05/2026

Article Accepted:09/06/2026

Published Online:10/06/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.06.205

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 reveal 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

on-going 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 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 used as intellectual tools for

understanding how Indian expressive forms operate. These theories foreground emotional engagement, suggestiveness, multivalence, all essential components of an Indian literary sensibility. Indian literature, at both ends of the age spectrum, engagement in literature that is characterized by indirection over explications, emotion over plot, suggestion over declarative and the dimensions of our contributions as readers lies 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 modal 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 experience 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 v. realism, and post-colonial 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 post-colonial 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:

The approach that is used in this research is based in qualitative literary analysis in order to explore the presence of Indian sensibility in Indian Writing in English with a main focus on Anita Desai's *In Custody* (Desai 44). The research brings together various aspects of literary criticism, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory, and engages with both literal thematic meaning and all aspects of the text - style, structure, and symbolically, while looking at how Indian sensibility can be traced at different narrative and theoretical levels. Since Indian sensibility itself is an evolving concept with numerous layers situated in a complex historical, philosophical and socio-political milieu, the approach I use has five interrelated steps:

1. Historical-Cultural Contextualization: The first stage is to reflectively understand Indian sensibility in an historical-cultural context. This base will afford a greater understanding of the development of Indian sensibility from its ancient origins through its eventual postcolonial emergence, while considering Indian thought, emotion, and aesthetics (with their histories) and their non- or prevailing imagination. I will examine and analyse those Indian literary-cultural precedents that were set by Vedic philosophies, by Buddhist

and Islamic influences, by Bhakti and Sufi traditions, and by Britain's colonial historical connections.

The early text and poetic tradition of ancient texts and epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana and Sanskrit drama and poetics, offered an aesthetic that was deeply suggestive and emotionally responsive based on Rasa (emotive essence) and Dhvani (suggestion). The huge contribution of Islamic and Persian literary traditions- products of centuries of gulmi exchanges- brought themes of longing, mysticism, and philosophical introspection, which shaped Indian poetry and prose in significant ways(Desai 87). British educational institutions and their colonial discourses offered English as literary a medium but also indoctrinated a sense of cultural inferiority. In what became colonial encounters, tensions arose between tradition and modernity, native and other, which became a common motif in Indian English writing.

2. Thematic Features: The second phase highlighted the identification and exploration of prominent themes that permeate Indian English literature conducive to the notion of Indian sensibility. These themes are literary indicators of cultural and emotional patterns unique to them.

A) Character development and the evolution of experience: Analyzing the various means and types of characters authors create helps identify literary persons and the emotions expressed. Contours of conflict: Analysis of conflict can inform the overall experiences shaped by oppositional forces.

3. The Future of Research: To consider possible future research on the textual analysis that relies on the work of others covering the changing status of literacy, modernization, and globalization, or theory concerning emotional reasoning, critical theory and collective memory in western culture.

Given the fluidity of Indian studies, investigating Indian authors for the rich emotional experiences expressed, such as in the work of Anita Desai, beckons as an intriguing path forward in suggesting future research. The texts influence how others experience their realizations of emotional and ethical experiences through collective and lived narratives.

Character psychology:

The character's inner lives, including their motives, conflicts, and coping strategies, reflect cultural value systems and emotional regularities. For example, Deven Sharma is a quintessential Desai character: introspective, struggling with conflicted emotions, and stuck between idealism and resignation. Imagery and symbolism: For example, Desai mentions dilapidated houses, deserted lanes, Urdu poetry, and broken relationships, which serve as

illustrations of cultural dislocation, emotional stagnation and loss of identity, and are not just portrayals.

4. Theoretical Integration: This phase draws upon literary theories and critical frameworks to extend the interpretation of Indian sensibility in the text. This includes:

A) Postcolonial Theory: Edward Said's notion of Orientalism helps us contemplate how Indian culture is generalized, romanticized, or distorted from a colonial stance. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity highlights how the Indian and Western cultural elements merge and collide, particularly relevant to Deven the English teacher's fascination with Urdu poetry (Bhabha 725). Gayatri Spivak's ideas on subaltern silence and representation offer ways to conceptualize marginal characters and gendered silences in Desai's fiction (Spivak 301).

B) Classical Indian Aesthetics: Rasa theory is a method for analyzing emotional tone of narrative, particularly Karuna (pity) and Shanta (serenity), both of which dominate situations in Desai's otherwise tranquil narratives. Dhvani is a technique whereby what is said allows layers of meaning and symbol that lie underneath the surface of the prose to be interpreted.

C) Indian Literary Criticism: Contributions by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and Jasbir Jain provide authors with culturally specific means for analyzing the emotional tenor and philosophical subtext of Indian writing in English.

Analysis and discussion: The Indian sensibility represents a broad and rich emotional, spiritual, and philosophical awareness of things, as well as a distinctive understanding of the world, which of course is intrinsic to the Indian worldview. As we will see in my writing on Desai's *In Custody*, Indian sensibility is a way of seeing and a literary strategy, even, which gives stories emotional weight, meanings that are more than factual, and a socio-cultural critique that makes statements. In this section, I will investigate how Indian sensibility is expressed in IWE, exploring some examples based on Desai's *In Custody*, to highlight its manifestations in the text with our focus on cultural contestation, hybridized language, introspective spirituality, and the way narrative is told.

At its centre, the Indian sensibility rests on a notion of emotional density and symbolic meaning forged through, Rasa and Dhvani. This is distinct from western literary sensibilities that focus on individuality, narrative tension, linear plots, and realism. Indian literature often ranges widely in its appreciation of suggestiveness, cyclicity, and collectivity. Anita Desai relies naturally on these principles in *In Custody*, where the protagonist, Deven Sharma, is far from confronting failure in terms of the outside world and instead attempts to engage with his internal dissonances associated with his wishes for cultural continuity, carrying the load of individual futility, and internalizing a death of poetic tradition he holds dear. The narrative is slow, symbolic, and psychologically laden - all markers of Indian sensibility (Desai 11).

Cultural disintegration and language loss are two of the most prominent themes in Desai's novel and are representative of the larger Indian contestation between modernity and tradition. Deven's desire to interview Nur, a once-renowned Urdu poet, represents a desire to cling to a disintegrating cultural legacy. This tension points to the postcolonial Indian reality where modernity, in the form of bureaucratic, educational, and political systems, disregards and erases older, pluralistic ways of cultural knowledges. Urdu once represented a sophisticated literary dialect, and its eclipse in the novel by a decidedly more functional Hindi is reflective of changes in national patterns of linguistic politics. For Deven, as a Hindi lecturer who possesses a soul filled with Urdu poetry, he is placed in the middle of the Indian sensibility: fragmented, nostalgic, spiritually bruised, but somehow not hopelessly disenchanting.

Desai's use of symbolism in narrative form also adds to this expression. Nur's dilapidated house, noise, filth, and impropriety of the poet's followers represents more than a setting, it is a metaphor for how India has neglected its cultural memory (Desai 193). The home suggests that while modern India has gained political freedom, it has abandoned the sanctity of its artistic and literary legacies. Likewise, Deven's broken tape recorder and inadequate institutional assistance further speak to a systemic indifference to support purposeful cultural engagement. These anxiety of material outcomes are also reflected in emotional breakdown—where Indian sensibility conveyed through silence, invokes personal suffering into larger cultural breakdowns.

The space between silence and speech also shapes Indian sensibility. Desai doesn't use explicit speech, but appeals to the power inherent in unsaid, in gaps, pauses, and silence. In Indian culture silence often has more weight than speech—it can signal dignity, agency, and resistance, and it can reflect despair or quiet sadness. The extensive silences in Deven's invitations to Nur, in addition to his tenuous psychological responses to institutional ridicule, all of Deven's still born monologues conjure an emotionally intelligent, culturally embedded psychodynamics as silence becomes a site of agency and resilience (Anand 78). This style of narration establishes Desai's work as foregrounding psychological realism driven by experience, not just Deven's suffering, but suffering that is bound by family, community, history, and place. Deven is situated in a country which has moved on, while English as a language of global prestige can never bear the emotional weight of loss. The novel thus becomes a site of negotiation, and a space where literature is able to re-imagine cultural identity (as unstable and contradictory perhaps, but not meaning less) (Desai 289).

The question of memory is also important—collective/individual memory—to the understanding of Indian sensibility. When Indian Writing in English invokes memory in a

manner that is always resistant and not merely nostalgic. Though, of course, there is a nostalgia aspect to memory in similar forms of resistance. In Deven's case, memory of Urdu poetry is aesthetic, but it is also spiritual and ontological. Deven's reverence and veneration for Nur's poetry is the only thing that keeps him tethered in an otherwise meaningless professional and personal life. Nur is a bitter, faded physical remnant of artistic purity and philosophical insight—a relic of the art and the thought of the past. A memory that is going to scream every time it comes close to the surfaces of profound hope and utter despair. The emotional universe of the novel is bolstered by something that despite its pain and also silence, a specific kind of emotional clarity that signifies intent in languageism and its sensibility. So much of Indian literature is a form of searching for an emotional truth to a heterogeneous reality, opposed to a Euro American tendency towards empirical clarity or empirical would like to think they can have.

Furthermore, in considering Indian sensibility, in order to analyze characters not simply as pure individuals, but as representations of collective socio-cultural conflicts, is significant. For example, within this consideration of Deven as a failed academic, we can think about how there exists within post-colonial India a certain idea of the intellectual in this country—intellectual which is precise in its fragmentation between idealistic, inward, overwhelmed, and ultimately paralyzed by a state of world, that is, a downtrodden state of mental knowing that misconstrues the positive and other aspects of valuing efficiency, and efficiency for a lack of measure or introspection.

In addition, Desai's Indian sensibility is also hybrid and postcolonial. Homi Bhabha's theorization of hybridity is relevant here. *In Custody* is situated in a third cultural space—neither completely colonial, nor purely indigenous. Additionally, English as a narrative medium itself is significant; it is the colonial language that expresses postcolonial pain of the loss of an indigenous language (Urdu) (Bhabha 798). The idea of double displacement—the displacement of language and culture—is very much a site of confusion, complexity, and difficult truths about Indian sensibility (Desai 111). This example of allegorical character-building drawing on classical Indian epics and contemporary trauma shows how Indian sensibility is a way of thinking that is at once philosophical, symbolic, and social realism. India's sensibility is not fixed. Desai's novel shows that it has a fluidity, shaped by ongoing forces of digitalization and globalization. Deven's failure is a cultural one, but it is also an institutional one. When universities, journals, and publishing no longer hold the possibility of cultural preservation and have taken on a transactional value, this institutional bureaucratic devolution is symptomatic of an increasingly broad loss of value, a pervasive theme in *IWE* (Anand 134). But, even through failure, and despair, our experience convinces Desai that the act of remembering, that the act of recording, that the act of deeply feeling, is worth it, even

when met with cultural inertia. In conclusion, Anita Desai's *In Custody* is both a mirror and a musing. It gestures toward Indian sensibility as a lived experience and a literary legacy through its layered storytelling, dispassionate style, and psychological depth. The novel does not only ask readers to witness the struggle and tension between tradition and modernity, but it asks readers to feel it: to sit with the melancholy of losing culture, the absurdity of institutional regicide, and the strange hope that what is sacred in memory and language may remain(Desai 164).

Conclusion:

The study of Indian sensibility in Indian Writing in English, particularly through Anita Desai's *In Custody*, also highlights the depth, multiplicity, and complexity of the cultural, emotional, and philosophical realms of India. Indian sensibility is ennobled by centuries old traditions, mediated through the colonial vector, and subject to transformations brought about by modernity's influences such as globalization and digitalization, and remains ever-present in literature. It has taken shape as a visceral emotional and intellectual worldview, that allows movement beyond dualistic constructs such as tradition vs. modernity, and east vs. west.. This research has illustrated that Indian literature is not simply a mechanism for narration, but a means of cultural memory, identity negotiation, and emotional self-reflection. Whether it is expressed through fundamental concepts, such as *rasa*, *dhvani*, hybridity, collective consciousness, or in themes of loss, longing, displacement, language politics, and searching for spirituality, Indian sensibility found expression in all of these instances. Writers such as Anita Desai engage with Indian sensibility, revealing its subtleties through the exploration of character's identity conflicts, silence as tension, and the inner lives - often with characters suspended between competing cultural sign systems.

The analysis of Desai's strategies of narration, character-building, symbolic language, and spatial metaphors indicates that Indian sensibility is not merely an essence, but rather a movement across interstitial spaces between traditions and modernity. It holds the multiplicity of contradictions, accepting literature to be a reflective agent of society as well as a reservoir for continuously developing Indian consciousness. Consequently, Indian sensibility stands not only as a means for understanding Indian English literature, but also as way of maintaining, questioning, and transforming the meaning of being Indian in a dynamic world. It can continue to infuse literature with its distinct notion of emotional intelligence, spirit of pluralism, and anchor in the philosophical concern of daily life, it re-affirms the Indian Literature, while bound to a place, will remain and be questioned as a universal expression.

Work Cited:

- Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Penguin Books, 1935.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Chatterjee, Bankim Chandra. *Anandamath*. Translated by Julius Lipner, Oxford UP.
- Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day*. Vintage, 1980.
- Cry, the Peacock. Orient Paperbacks, 1963.
- In Custody*. Penguin Books, 1998.
- Narayan, R. K. *The Guide*. Indian Thought Publications, 1958.
- Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. Oxford UP, 1938.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.