

Anita Desai's *In Custody*: Delhi's Tryst with Turmoil

Sangeeta Mittal

Associate Professor

Maharaja Agrasen College

(University of Delhi)

Vasundhara Enclave

Delhi, India

sangeeta685@gmail.com

Abstract

Anita Desai is a well-known denizen of Delhi, or rather “Old Delhi”, whose novels *In Custody* and *Clear Light of Day* based in the cultural and spatial turmoil of a nation split in the wake of Independence in 1947 and a space lost in the dislocation of communities, cultures and languages, almost always find mention in the tradition of “partition literature”. While the debate goes on regarding the status of these novels as “partition literature”, this paper posits that there is unequivocal merit in including both *In Custody* and *Clear Light of Day* in the list of Delhi Novels as both attempt to preserve lost spaces, worlds and pasts. The paper examines *In Custody* in particular for its political quality and sociological worth which lies not just in taking the probe beyond the self, but also in taking it beyond the impact of cultural change on people to the very issue of nature and composition of this web called “culture”. The Delhi enthusiasts’ exploration of the Delhi Novel is therefore incomplete without the “Old Delhi” tradition, and within that *In Custody* stands out as an abiding and enriching text of Delhi’s encounter with cataclysmic change. The paper examines the novel in the light of this upheaval that lies buried in what we simply today know as “Old Delhi”, in the memory of diaspora and in the lives of trapped individuals like Nur- the protagonist of the novel.

Keywords: *Delhi, Delhi culture, Delhi Novel, Anita Desai, Old Delhi, Shahjahanabad*

Anita Desai is a well-known denizen of Delhi, or rather “Old Delhi”, whose novels *In Custody* and *Clear Light of Day* based in the cultural and spatial turmoil of a nation split in the wake of Independence in 1947 and a space lost in the dislocation of communities, cultures and languages, almost always find mention in the tradition of “partition literature”. While a

www.ijellh.com

school believes that it is an upper-class, elite, bird's eye view of an extremely violent and turbulent event (Roy, 2010), there is another which thinks that the trauma is projected in psycho-spatial terms, and thus is intensified rather than obfuscated by the personal as well as collective memory of the writer and her generation. Writes Kanika Sharma:

... by understanding the associations of space with trauma and reading the tense narrative which is created through the collective memory of selective forgetting and remembering, not just by the Das family, but also by the Mishras next door, it highlights that Desai has cleverly crafted the trauma of Partition as it was lived and felt in Old Delhi. This makes it an evocative account of Partition, as it never considers it as an event of mass migration, mutilation, murder and rapes, but as a past that keeps reeling into the present – a past that is inescapable – and despite the clear light of the day, a dawn which will never arrive. (Sharma, 2016)

While the debate goes on regarding the status of these novels as “partition literature”, there is unequivocal merit in including both *In Custody* and *Clear Light of Day* in the list of Delhi Novels as both were attempting to preserve lost spaces, worlds and pasts:

But this was my world. It was the world of Old Delhi, in those pre-Independence days, when one was really very much aware of Muslim culture having made Old Delhi, just the way the British made New Delhi, and they are two very different worlds actually. The world I grew up in was that of Old Delhi in which one still heard Urdu poetry being recited. When I went to school, half of the population there was studying Urdu, the other half Hindi. So I was very aware of that historical, multi-cultural world. In that sense, in 1947, with Independence and Partition, we had the most traumatic moment in Indian history, for my generation certainly. That was when it was all coming apart. So perhaps, again, in a very subconscious way, it was an effort to put them together again, these broken pieces, to hold them together again. (Desai, 2009)

Delhi enthusiasts “strongly recommend” her “Old Delhi” novels as these novels have “delved deep into the soul of Delhi and brought alive the manners of its people quite evocatively” (Soofi, 2007). In this sense, they belong to the tradition of “Old Delhi” novels written by proud and nostalgic citizens of Shahjahanabad like Krishna Sobti who brought back the aroma, flavor and colours of its composite culture in novels like *Dilo Danish* (*The Heart has*

its Reasons in English translation by Meenakshi Swamy and). The tradition originates in citizens who have seen their beloved Shahjahanabad reduced to “Old Delhi” - a chaotic and jostling wholesale market post independence and partition. The Shahjahanabad residents relocated to either other parts of Delhi (like Sobti) or to other parts of the world (like Desai), but they carried and valued this rich culture all the more in their new locations. Both Sobti and Desai, belonging to the first generation and directly affected generation of loss, choose to articulate this loss not through images of violence and displacement too traumatic to be handled perhaps, but through images haunting their memories of the feel of a place that can no longer be felt. Her daughter Kiran Desai, the author of Man Booker Prize winning novel “The Inheritance of Loss” (2006), carries the burden of her parents’ generation, articulating this loss in a more candid and courageous manner. The second generation engagement with trauma is like the exorcising of ghosts not only in its own inheritance but in the psyche of its parents’ generation as well. Speaking to Kiran Desai, Anita Desai elaborates her motivation and methodology of engaging with “Old Delhi” thus:

KD You lost your grandparents before you knew them, your parents' landscapes, your own one of Old Delhi when Partition occurred.

AD Yes, landscapes, languages.

If I hadn't left India, if everything made sense and was continuous, perhaps I would not have found the necessity of putting all the bits together. (Desai and Desai, 2011)

While Sobti’s *The Heart has its Reasons* is a full-blooded recall of that feisty culture through the love triangle of Kripa Narayan, Kutumb and Mehak, *Clear Light of Day*, narrates three different responses to partition-the Das family’s psycho-spatial refusal to change, Hyder Ali family’s survival escape from change and Mishras’ impotent oblivion to change. Both Sobti and Desai shut out any mention of the earth shattering events, choosing to rue the loss as a fond remembrance and as a subliminal memorabilia respectively. Desai’s engagement is more “political” in *In Custody* as she chooses to emerge out of her own confines:

I definitely had a feeling, writing *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*, of opening the door and stepping out into the street, walking, seeing, experiencing other places, other lives. (Desai, 2001)

I also wanted to write about the male world; I wanted to try my hand at writing about how life is like for men, how different it is from the life of women. (Desai, 2011)

The true political quality and sociological worth of this work, however, lies not just in taking the probe beyond the self as mirrored in Bim, but also in taking it beyond the impact of cultural change on people to the very issue of nature and composition of this web called “culture”. The Delhi enthusiasts’ exploration of the Delhi Novel is therefore incomplete without the “Old Delhi” tradition, and within that *In Custody* stands out as an abiding and enriching text of Delhi’s encounter with cataclysmic change. The paper examines the novel in the light of this upheaval that lies buried in what we simply today know as “Old Delhi”, in the memory of diaspora and in the lives of trapped individuals like Nur- the protagonist of the novel.

To make another comparison, Anita Desai’s *In Custody* brings out images of a Delhi, which antithetically to Nayantara Sehgal’s New Delhi in *This Time of Morning*, is in several stages not of ‘making’ but of ‘unmaking’. While Shahjahanabad has become Old Delhi post-independence and partition, the legacies of the wiped out dynasty stick out like befuddled pebbles on a riverbed from where the river has changed its course. *In Custody* has a Delhi which tests the endurance and fecundity of individuals and cultures by subjecting them to a whirlwind of cataclysmic change. Nur, his house, his poetry and his predicament are all reminders of how en masse political, demographic and consequent, cultural change can be excruciating in many different ways. Shahjahanabad has always been a site of cultural change. Most simply, culture can be assumed to be forever changing. Since culture is a sum total of learned patterns of behavior and ideas (beliefs, attitudes, values and ideals) characteristic to a particular populace, these patterns are improvised, shed and replaced as human needs and conditions change. Culture can also change when new discoveries and inventions present themselves as alternatives or improvements to existing practices. However, not all societies are equally receptive. Those which are more receptive are seen to be progressive societies while those which are reluctant are called conservative societies. Why societies are inherently different in this regard cannot be explained by any generalization, yet strong socio-economic communities are thought to be more innovative. At points and times between two different cultures, cultural diffusion is a spontaneous process

though borrowing of traits is selective and assimilative. In case of unequal relations between the two cultures in contact, extensive cultural conversion in the subordinate culture to comply and conform (acculturation) is an adaptive strategy for survival. Like biological adaptation, the cultures in which maladaptive traits abound tend to die, while those which are able to incorporate adaptive traits adequately and quickly survive. Revolutions are regarded to be the most unsettling of all changes as there is a violent replacement of one cultural ethos by another. Shahjahanabad has seen it all. Despite being home to natural cultural refinement and evolution, creation of composite culture from Hindu and Muslim contact, interference by imperialist Christian powers and adaptive responses to colonization, it is caught off-guard by the violent revolution which engulfs it in the form of independence and partition.

Writes Thomas Krafft, After the demise of the Mughal Empire and the quelling of the uprising of 1857 the third decisive hiatus in the development of Shahjahanabad/ Old Delhi was Independence and the subsequent partition of the subcontinent.

The bloody interchanges between the religious groups, the mass exodus of large portions of the Muslim population, the still greater influx of refugees from Punjab and the rapid growth of Delhi in the following period caused a radical break from the existing structures. In many quarters of the Walled City an almost complete exchange of population took place. In this respect and with reference to their political and economic influence, we must speak of the marginalisation of the Muslim portion of the population. (Krafft, 1993, p. 93)

Tracing the transformation of Shahjahanabad to what is today called Old Delhi, Krafft outlines the major forces and factors which fuelled this transition. The population of the walled city jumped from an estimated 170,000 to 380,000 between 1941 and 1951 and peaked to 400,000 in 1961. Thousands of houses changed ownership through mostly illegal takeovers and allocation of “evacuee” properties to refugees by the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation. As far as the Muslim population was concerned, the upper and middle strata left for Pakistan. Only the economically and educationally backward segment stayed behind. Thus, it was a cakewalk for the robust and literate Punjabi migrants from Pakistan to establish economic and demographic dominance in the area. By 1958, 74.5% enterprises operating in Old Delhi were those that were founded after Partition. Buildings available in Old Delhi were put to commercial use. Old Delhi emerged as the hub of wholesale trade owing to these new

enterprises spanning over more than 20 commodity groups like textiles, grain, construction material, hardware, iron, electronic goods, paper, dry fruit, spices, vehicle and motor parts. Demand for sales and storage space quadrupled leading to the encroachment of commercial ventures into residential spaces. The trend continued as trade enterprises based in this area multiplied sevenfold and manufacturing units tripled between 1961 and 1981. Residential buildings continued to get converted to showrooms, workshops and warehouses. Prices of realty boomed with this escalation in demand and both due to incentive offered by high realty prices and deteriorating civic conditions, the residents of this area continued to move out to more habitable neighbourhoods. Residents were soon outnumbered by the workforce that was employed in these enterprises. After 1980, even wealthy and well-built *mohallas* like Katra Neel fell prey to commercial infiltration. Writes Krafft,

Originally commercial use was almost entirely confined to the principal lane of the *mahallah*. Today shops and godowns seem to be everywhere. New shops were constructed even in small by-lanes and a few cul-de-sacs can be found that are restricted to housing only. The majority of the residents when interviewed claimed that the traditional mahallah structure was being destroyed by growing commercialisation. The influx of goods and non-residents into the even most remote side lanes changed the character of this originally semi-private space. For the residents this results in a loss of identification with their neighbourhood as well as a general decline in housing quality. (Krafft, 1993, p. 109)

Due to mammoth increase in textile trade, demand for space spiraled and extraordinarily high prices began to be paid to induce residents to shift out of this area. Between 1961 and 1981, a loss of 40% resident population was recorded by DDA registers. Interviews and field studies in DDA planning zones A-16 to A-24 revealed that while Hindus, Jains and Sikhs were quick to shift out, Muslims showed a tendency towards “residential persistence” (Krafft, 1993, p. 111). Muslims cited cultural identity and security as the predominant reasons for continuing to live in the Old Delhi area. While middle classes shifted out to the New Delhi, only those who could not afford to buy property, high rent rates and travel fare remained in the area. This led to a qualitative degradation of residential quarters. The highest migration rate was found to be in the age group ranging from 20 to 40 as the breaking up of extended family and community living bonds was responsible for driving out the newly married

householders who chose to set up establishments in more upmarket urban areas. According to a 1980 report, the majority of the population (75%) living in the walled city belonged to the economically weaker section, most households (73%) consisted of single room tenements and about two-thirds of the houses were rented. The Delhi Rent Control Act of 1958 also contributed to the buildings' state of disrepair as it allowed old tenants to continue paying very low rates and also made it impossible to evict underpaying old tenants. This led to a resource crunch which made the owners reluctant about investing in the upkeep of the buildings.

It is against this backdrop that the story of Nur in *In Custody* has been wrought. Nur recalls a Delhi when

...Delhi was like a shining tapestry- not the thick quilt of smoke and fumes it is now. The air was as brilliant as a piece of silk, the sun sparkled upon it like a huge pendant fashioned by a jeweller ... even with only two rupees in my pocket, I was a rich man then. (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 173)

In contrast to this radiance and prosperity, the picture which Nur's house and neighborhood presents after 30 years of independence is dismal. As Deven enters this "pullulating honeycomb of commerce" to seek an interview with Nur, he observes that

If it had not been for the colour and the noise, Chandni Chowk might have been a bazaar encountered in a nightmare; it was so like a maze from which he could find no exit, in which he wandered between the peeling, stained walls of office buildings, the overflowing counters of shops and stalls, wondering if the urchin sent to lead him through it was not actually a malevolent imp leading him to his irrevocable disappearance in the reeking heart of the bazaar. The heat and crowds pressed down from above all sides, solid and suffocating as sleep. (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 32, 33)

The nightmarish, surreal, psychedelic quality is accentuated as Deven walks past an ill-assorted pastiche of things and people like lurid Japanese sarees, nets of gold and silver embroidery looking like flashy but shimmering prostitutes, pyramids of crystallised fruit, milk steaming and bubbling in drowsy pans, evil smelling shops of herbal medicines, booths of astrologers, palmists and soothsayers with illustrated scrolls, mynah birds and gemstones spread out in front, pavement stalls of scarves, underwear, glasses and enamel plates followed

by silversmiths and jewelry shops. A near accident with a rickshaw, a narrow lane lined with gutters and refuse, an overflowing blocked gutter, a humped bull munching a paper bag from an open dustbin and a row of small, high green wall of an ayurvedic hospital which barred any sunlight from entering in the area on one side and tightly shut wooden doors set into straight, faded walls on the other marked the narrow alley in which Nur's house was located. The arrival of evening only added to this phantasmagoric feel. In the evening,

... the white hot sky became blotched with the city's soot and faded to grey and then to mauve and finally to an uneasy disturbed darkness. It could not become wholly dark because then the shops and cinema houses and restaurants and the streets of the bazaar below lit up for the night and the sky was tinged sporadically red and orange and yellow and violet, like an old hag at a fair crazily dancing a dance of seven veils. The noises of the street and its traffic intensified as well and through the steady rumble coiled and uncoiled the long steely loops of song blaring out of a cinema house at the end of the street. The rooftop did not really raise one above the din of the streets; it was as if they were inside a balloon, floating above but remaining enclosed. (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 48)

The house which is hired for tape recording Nur's memoirs close to Nur's own house turns out to be a brothel where Nur is said to have found his second wife, Imtiaz Bibi. Nur's companions now are "lafangas of the bazaar world- shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed parasites" (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 49). They speak an unrefined language "as if they belonged to a world of hectic activity on the fringes of art and creativity" (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 49). It is not just these louts of the bazaar who feed like parasites on Nur's poetic genius living "out the fantasy of being poets, artists and bohemians" on his terrace evening after evening, but also Imtiaz Bibi who manipulates and apes the poet in a bid to fulfill her own poetic pretensions and aspirations. His beloved language Urdu has also come a long way. From the lived and lilting lingua franca of the commoner, the poet and the king, it has got reduced to the language of the 'minority community', identified with Islam and relegated to Urdu departments or publications. Nur says to Deven,

How can there be Urdu poetry where there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished. The defeat of the Moghuls by the British threw a noose over its head,

and the defeat of the British by the Hindiwallahs tightened it. So you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried. (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 39)

Urdu poetry is as much endangered as the Urdu language. The much admired and appreciated metaphor and melody has not only had to negotiate with modernity but also had to compete with Hindi. In the process, the familiar genres and themes seem to have lost their relevance and have demanded the evolution of a contemporary poet and a contemporary audience. The debate on Nur's rooftop about the past, present and future of Urdu language and poetry is heated but hollow because it is just that, a facile debate lacking earnestness and initiative. Nur reprimands his companions by saying

You recite verses as if they were nursery rhymes your mother had composed. I tell you, we must get over this rolling of Urdu verses into little sugar pills for babies to suck. We need the roar of lions, or the boom of cannon, so that we can march upon these Hindiwallahs and make them run. Let them see the power of Urdu. (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 52)

A little later Nur sums up the daily debate between "the India camp and the Pakistan camp, the pure- Persian camp and the demotic-Hindustani camp" by saying

Wrong, wrong for thirty years you have been wrong. It is not a matter of Pakistan and Hindustan, of Hindi and Urdu. It is not even a matter of history. It is time you should be speaking of ... it is all we really know in our hearts. (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 53)

Whereas the debate is an idle pastime and pompous verbosity for Nur's companions, for Nur it traces a personal and poetic calamity, yet he finds himself quite inadequate in dealing with it. The inadequacy has partly to do with the scale and speed of change and partly with languor and lethargy of a dissolute life style which is difficult to shake off. Nur has experienced the precipitous fall from the heyday of a integrated culture and community to the post independence and post partition reality where that way of life is no more than a tattered rag flailing against the restructured urban and cultural identity of Delhi. The ravages of time is a stock theme of Urdu poetry and the pathos of what Nur has gone through, he can best express in his wonted symbol and style but Nur realises that in the era of polarised and political war of languages, poetry cannot weep, it has to roar. The comfortable time when Urdu poetry existed in the realm of aesthetics and not politics had passed for it in India.

Despite bitter battles being fought in the political and cultural spheres of the Indian sub-continent, Urdu poetry, with the arrogance and confidence of the language of the rulers, persisted in the politically neutral decadent art-for-art-sake formula. Steeped in the tradition of Urdu poetry, Deven makes an estimation of the greatness of these poets:

...they could distance events and emotions, place them where perspective made it possible to view things clearly and calmly. He realised that he loved poetry not because it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where they became bearable. That is what Nur's verse did- placed frightening and inexplicable experiences like time and death at a point where they could be seen and studied, in safety. (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 54)

This has been the habit of Urdu poetry. Theoretically Nur argues that it needs to be jettisoned but to break through the torpor which has engulfed the community and launch onto a constructive and corrective course is easier said than done. It is tied to an entire habit of the mind and injecting new blood into the indolent mindset of the community is a tall order impossible to accomplish. Says Nur, "This sifting and selecting from the debris of our lives? It can't be done, my friend, it can't be done, I learnt that long ago" (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 189). An altered urban, linguistic and political ethos has left Nur baffled and paralysed. He is used to an aristocratic way of life where language and art were one among the many material pleasures of life. Deven expects Nur to be living in hermetic dignity away from any foibles or failings. He is dismayed by the evening soirees of hoi-polloi on his terrace, his interest in wrestling and *akhadas* on the banks of river Yamuna, his appetite for rich foods and liquor despite being afflicted by piles and the control which his two wives have over him. What he calls the "soiled, discoloured and odorous rags of his life" are in fact the legacies of his ancestral tradition (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 189). Nur thinks of Deven as the custodian of his poetry and yet he thwarts his attempts as he cannot give up the whimsical and temperamental tantrums of the spoilt, the rich and the powerful. He neither attempts to control his rabble rousing companions and quarrelsome wives nor does he attempt to adapt to technology. This self destructive conditioning of the Muslim populace is mirrored in the condition of Deven's colleague, Siddiqui, the lone member of the Urdu department of Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore. Siddiqui is a distant relative of nawab from Delhi who has fled during the mutiny to settle down in the relatively safe confines of this town. His house tells the tale of the Muslim

aristocracy which has steadily declined from prosperity to paralysis. Even within the dilapidated house, Siddiqui keeps up the pretence and lifestyle of a “grand landowner, a man of leisure and plenty” (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 150). The sordid reality of “the advanced state of decay” is inscribed all around him and yet, he lives in a make belief world “as if all were still in order, still functioning in another, more opulent age” (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 151). The pattern at his house is startlingly repetitive for Deven when he visits Siddiqui as Siddiqui seems to be hopelessly addicted to hedonistic pleasures like wine, rich food, gambling, musical soirees and indiscrete choice of company. Siddiqui also possesses Nur’s talent “for remaking fact into more acceptable, more attractive fiction” (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 152).

The retarded and contorted response of the Muslim gentry in the face of sweeping sea change of circumstances results in the feeling of alienation which decapitates Nur and his ilk even further. Nur finds that the conditions of existence have been transformed so much beyond recognition that along with once familiar lifestyle and relationships, the once familiar poetic idiom and ideas have also become bizarre and absurd. Pigeons, once tame and friendly, have now become audacious enough to physically assault the poet on his terrace for grains. All he can do is to lament, “Who would have thought that one day the bird, the symbol of flight and song, would cease to be a poet’s inspiration and become a threat?” (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 46). Thus, Nur finds himself robbed of his tongue twice. The toppled and crumbled *weltanschauung* of the poet gives birth to the sense of alienation in the poet. Alienation is defined as an emptiness stemming from “the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behaviour cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks” (Seeman, 1971, p. 135). In other words, as Kalekin-Fishman (1996, p. 97) says, “A person suffers from alienation in the form of 'powerlessness' when she is conscious of the gap between what she would like to do and what she feels capable of doing”. The psycho-analyst sociologist Rotter (1966) associates alienation with the missing correlation between internal control and external locus of control, that is, indeterminacy of the degree to which success or failure is a matter of external factors (e.g. luck, chance, contacts), as against success or failure being dependent on individual skills or character. A natural corollary of this sense of powerlessness is a sense of meaninglessness which can be understood as “the individual’s sense of understanding events in which he is engaged (Seeman, 1959, p. 786). Thus, where powerlessness refers to the sensed inability to control

outcomes, meaninglessness refers to the sensed inability to predict outcomes. Seeman argues that since living in an intelligible world is a prerequisite to expectancies for control, hence a traditional *weltanschauung* gives the security of being in control while a rapidly transforming one gives a nauseating feel of things whirring out of control (Seeman, 1959). The malaise is compounded by the void of normlessness (or what Durkheim refers to as anomie) “denoting the situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behaviour”. This produces an inability to identify with the dominant values of society. Seeman adds that this aspect can manifest in a particularly negative manner, “The anomic situation [...] may be defined as one in which there is a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviours are required to achieve given goals” (Seeman, 1959, p. 788). Neal & Collas (2000, p. 122) write, “Normlessness derives partly from conditions of complexity and conflict in which individuals become unclear about the composition and enforcement of social norms. Sudden and abrupt changes occur in life conditions, and the norms that usually operate may no longer seem adequate as guidelines for conduct”.

Nur comes across as an alienated individual. His powerlessness is evident in the despair and defeat he seems to have accepted about the future of Urdu, his poetry and his community in India. He sees very little hope of Urdu being revitalised by the debates on his rooftop or the efforts of people like Murad or Deven or university departments. He calls himself the corpse of the language, waiting to be buried. He can only see suffering stretched out in front of him and the release from the suffering lies in death. He allows himself to be persuaded by Deven to electronically document his poetry but the strain caused on him by this strange procedure is so much that he abandons the project by saying

... let me go to I have waiting for me- six feet of earth in the cemetery by the mosque. ... No, I will not resume. All one can resume, at my age, is the primordial sleep. I am going to curl up on my bed like a child in its mother’s womb and I shall sleep, shall wait for sleep to come. (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 191)

The meaninglessness experienced by him is writ large in his verses which express vacuity, absurdity and adversity in life.

Life is no more than a funeral procession winding
towards the grave,

Its small joys and flowers of funeral wreaths ... (p. 21)

Many sins, and much suffering; such is the pattern

Fate has traced on my tablet, with blood ... (p. 41)

My body no more than a reed pen cut by the sword's
tip,

Useless and dry till dipped in the ink of life's blood. (p. 42)

Night ends, dawn breaks, and sorrow reappears,

Addressing us in the morning light with a cock's shrill crow. (p. 66)

The demise of the “*tahzeeb*” or refined, courtly behaviour on which he has been brought up has accelerated his cracking up into a senile and mercurial personality. Deven is puzzled by Nur's odd behaviour on several occasions as it not only belies his expectations of Nur as a poet but even as a civil and courteous human being. Nur lashes out at Deven for disturbing his siesta by saying “Fool, are you a fool” (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 35). He mocks, rebukes and pokes Deven. He is indiscriminate in the company he keeps. He eats and drinks much in excess of his delicate health. He allows himself to petition for money to Deven. He makes inordinate demands on him during tape recording. He digresses from one topic to another without yielding much literary output. If the disappearance of the social mores he is accustomed to is a predominant cause of his dysfunctional gentility, the shifts in gender and marital roles also contribute to his impaired judgement about propriety. His second wife is a shrew who wants to cure him not only of his degenerate ways but also of any illusions he might be having of being a great poet. The rise of the woman contender in the male bastion confounds his sanity further. Deven cannot fathom what could have compelled Nur to agree to Imtiaz Bibi's preposterous demand of organising a *mushaira* for her in the house. Nur flounders from situation to situation because in his transitioning society where norms of behaviour are in a dizzy state of flux, the conviction or courage to resist or enforce is not easy to retain. Nur's is a case of shrinking space as his infringed claim to the status of the insider leaves him confined to a reclusive corner. The centre has become the corner. Any attempt to possess, claim, preserve or retain space in kaleidoscopic landscape of this changing and expanding Delhi leads to a sense of loss and alienation.

This Delhi in the throes of utterly chaotic churning has opposite effects on the ‘insider’ and the ‘outsider’. Deven is treated like an outsider by Nur who loathes his entry

into his house, his language, his culture and his life. Though he calls Deven to be the custodian of his verses in a moment of euphoric optimism, yet he hardly bequeaths any nuggets of his tradition to him. Deven is an outsider on account of being a Hindu, a Hindi speaking and teaching person, a non-resident of Delhi and an earner of bread for his family instead of a poet dedicated to the service of Urdu language. Nur's relationship with his space collides and converges with Deven's own relationships to form grotesque socio-psychic spatial patterns. On his home turf in Mirpore, Deven finds himself irrevocably trapped in antitheses like Urdu vs. Hindi, poetry vs. profession, responsibility vs. freedom, material vs. intellectual. His stasis also stems from another overarching antithesis- Mirpore vs. Delhi. While Mirpore stands for the drudgery of daily life with its formlessness and monotony, Delhi, in his imagination and aspiration, stands for elevating intellectual and vocational pursuits. Deven considers the very short geographical distance between Delhi and Mirpore unbridgeable as Mirpore's "solidity and stubbornness had formed a trap" and thus this distance "became for him the impassable desert that lay between him and the capital with its lost treasures of friendship, entertainment, attractions and opportunities" (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p, 17-18). When the opportunity to visit Nur in Delhi arises, it is to him "the summons for which he had been waiting all these years". It is to be a visit that would "haul him up from the level on which he existed- mean, disordered and hopeless- into another higher sphere." He expects himself to be "sloughing off and casting away the meanness and dross of his past existence and steadily approaching a new and wondrously illuminated era." Though his first brush with Delhi is nightmarish in which idealised notions clash with unsettling reality, yet the encounter helps him incorporate a corrective vision in his world view which is akin to discovery and acceptance of the adjusted self unlike the steady dissipation and alienation of Nur. As he leaves the poet in his wife's captivity and his poetry desecrated in vomit, he concludes simplistically

Dawn and poetry he thought ... all that was simply not real, not true; it was humbug, hypocrisy and not to be trusted. If it were true then it would have stood the test of actual experience, and it had not. Oh, it had not, it had not. Henceforth, he would avoid that mirage, that dream that so easily twisted into nightmare. Any reality was preferable ... (Desai, 1984/ 2007, p. 64)

With this cynical repudiation of poetry in favour of ‘reality’, Deven sets up yet another antithesis to afflict himself with.

His subsequent encounters, however, plunge him deeper into the human experience, and he ambles with questions like “What’s it all about” and “What is it all for” echoing in his mind on the roads of Delhi. He shuns the familiarity of Nur’s house and Raj’s aunt’s house to sit in the detached anonymity of a city park. He finds himself contemplating the serene geometrical patterns of the *chaharbagh* style park and the majesty and enormity of Jama Masjid visible from the park. The eternity and serenity of these classic monuments is like a silent resolution of all his conflicts. He reaches an epiphany of self discovery sitting in the park. He understands that in the existential condition of mankind, the mere mechanics of survival interfere with the autonomous, ineffable perfection of art but in this moment of epiphany, he is able to extricate art from all the unnecessary juxtapositions he had thrust it in out of his ignorance- mandane/ exotic, domesticity/ creativity, profession/ vocation, trap/ liberation, Delhi/ Mirpore:

Deven recalled, incongruously enough, the conversation in the canteen with Jayadev, how they had envied their scientist colleagues who had at their command the discipline of mathematics, of geometry, in which every question has an answer and every problem its solution. If art, if poetry, could be made to submit their answers, not merely to contain them within perfect unblemished shapes but to release them and make them available, then- he thought, then-

But then the bubble would be breached and burst, and it would no longer be perfect. And if it were not perfect, and constant, then it would all have been for nothing, it would be nothing. (Desai, 1948/ 2007, p. 219)

When he reaches Mirpore, catastrophe stares in his face and though the novel ends as he runs away or towards it, he can see his two significant relationships- with his wife and with Nur- independent of each other with tragic lucidity. The Delhi outsider comes back not with feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness and normlessness but with greater control and clarity. This is because Deven is more adaptive and less traumatised by the sudden disappearance of traditional cultural loci. He makes efforts to alleviate his misery and boredom and adopts official and technological means to fulfil his duty towards his ideal. He is not paralysed or confounded by the topsy-turvy nature of things. Rather, his experience has

a calming and enlightening effect on him. He is no less a victim of existential conflict as Nur is but his struggle has tragic dignity. This portrayal of a scooped up cultural space which can be both devastating and uplifting paves way for portrayals which deal with the reorganisation of the cultural contents which have been disembowelled from the depths of this culture by the fury of the partition.

References:

- Datta, V N. (2002). Panjabi Refugees and the Urban Development of Greater Delhi. In R.E Frykenberg (Ed.), *Delhi through the Ages- Essays in Urban History, Culture and Society* as reprinted in N. Gupta (Ed.) *The Delhi Omnibus*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. (first published in 1986).
- Desai, Anita. (2000). *Clear Light of day*. New York: Mariner Books. (first published in 1980).
- Desai, Anita. (2001). [Interview by Magda Costa]. Interview with Anita Desai. In *South Asian Women's Network (SAWNET)*. Retrieved from http://www.sawnet.org/books/writing/desai_interview.html
- Desai, A. (2007). *In Custody*. NOIDA: Random House India (first published in 1984).
- Desai, Anita. (2009). [Interview by Vanessa Guignery and AlexisTadie]. In *Custody and Beyond: A Conversation with Anita Desai*. In *Études Anglaises, Vol. 62 (3)*. Retrieved from <https://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-anglaises-2009-3-page-370.htm>
- Desai, Anita. (2011). [Interview by Kiran Desai]. In *Conversation: Kiran Desai meets Anita Desai*. In *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/11/kiran-desai-anita-desai-in-conversation>

- Desai, Anita. (November 1, 2012). [Interview by Prasad, Ramamurthy]. In Conversation with Anita Desai. In *Conde Nast Traveller*. Retrieved from <http://www.cntraveller.in/story/conversation-anita-desai/>
- Kalekin-Fishman, D. (1996). Tracing the Growth of Alienation: Enculturation, Socialization, and Schooling in a Democracy. In F. Geyer (Ed.) *Alienation, Ethnicity, and Postmodernism*. Westport. CONN: Greenwood Press, 95-106
- Krafft, Thomas (2003). Contemporary Old Delhi: Transformation of an Historical Place. In Eckhart Ehlers-Thomas Krafft (Ed.), *Shahjahanabad/Old Delhi- Tradition and Colonial Change*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 93-119. (first published in 1993)
- Neal, A.G. & Collas, S.F. (2000). *Intimacy and Alienation: Forms of Estrangement in Female/Male Relationships*. New York: Garland.
- Rotter, Julian B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied Vol 80(1)*, 1-28. doi:[10.1037/h0092976](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0092976)
- Roy, Rituparna. (2010). Women during the Partition: Victim and Agent. In *South Asian Partition Fiction in English From Kushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh*. Amsterdam: Asterdam University Press, pp. 63-88.
- Sahgal, Nayantara. (2008). *This Time of Morning*. NOIDA: Harper Collins. (first published in 1965).
- Seeman, M. (1959). On the meaning of alienation. *American Sociological Review*, 24(6), 783-791.
- Seeman, M. (1971). The urban alienations: Some dubious theses from Marx to Marcuse. *Journal of Personality and Social Psycholo.*, 19(2), pp. 135-143. DOI: 10.1037/h0031270
- Sharma, Kanika. (2016). Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day. In *Muse India Vol.68*. Retrieved from <http://www.museindia.com/focuscontent.asp?issid=62&id=5880>
- Sobti, K. (2005). *The Heart has its Reasons* (Anand, Reema and Swamy, Meenakshi, Trans.). New Delhi: Katha (original published 1993).

Volume IV
Issue VII
July 2016

IJELLH
International Journal of English
Language, Literature and Humanities

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
2321-7065

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal