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Duality of Illusion and Reality in Desai's In Custody

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Narinder K. Sharma,
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Abstract: In his article "Duality of Illusion and Reality in Desai's *In Custody*" Narinder K. Sharma analyses Anita Desai's internal confrontation of choices. In the novel, Desai's narration offers various options at every step and the author suggests that it becomes difficult to decide what actually should be done. The attempt is to personalize impersonal time and space thereby brings it into the domain of conflicting choices signifying an existential desire to manifest freedom. Going a step further, it can be deciphered that the individual desires to make an ideal choice to experience "authenticity"; however, the desire of making an ideal choice results in the creation of psychic tension. Thus, for Desai, the subject often feels a psychic pull which signifies a "lack," a "void," or a possibility of something ideal left out or missed. In Sharma's analysis of *In Custody* the contradiction that splits an individual apart as subjective reflection takes place with relation to making an existential choice.

Narinder K. SHARMA

Duality of Illusion and Reality in Desai's *In Custody*

Anita Desai is a writer who does not believe in weaving the plots of her novel merely on a figment of imagination. As one delves in the world of Desai, one feels that although a work of fiction, her creations are grounded in lived experience. It is important to mention in the present context that her texts are often subjective and that her greatness as a novelist is not confined to wiping the tears of her characters or simply empowering them to take cudgels but also to delineate the existential "duality" we as individuals, as well as participants in mass culture often face. This may often be considered as existential "polarities"/"binaries" of dilemmas, traps, confusions, conflicts, contradictions, choices or absurdities as scholars and critics may love to call.

In the work of Desai duality means a sort of internal confrontation of choices. As life offers various options at every step of life, it becomes really very difficult to decide what actually should be done and the same argument carries more weight considering the fact that Desai's individual is often "free" to "choose." The dilemma often leads someone in a confused territory of thought causing a state of chaos and angst. The attempt is to personalize the impersonal time and space thereby bringing it into the domain of conflicting choices signifying an existential desire to manifest freedom. Going a step further, it can be deciphered that the individual desires to make an ideal choice to experience "authenticity" of his/her existence. However, the desire of making an ideal choice results in the creation of psychic tension in an individual. An individual often feels a psychic pull which signifies a "lack," a "void," or a possibility of something ideal left out or missed giving birth to the play of presence and absence, lack and desire, illusion and reality, etc. The contradiction splits an individual apart as subjective reflection takes place with relation to making an existential choice. The dilemmas start haunting the individual. This sort of condition is common to everybody although in some cases, the number may be less. In existentialist parlance, truth is more a matter of decision than of discovery as the nature of the choice is criterion constituting rather than criterion-less. The criterion constituting choices give a "unity" and direction to a person's life thereby paving the way for subsequent transcendence wherein self-actualization may become a concrete reality. But we do find ourselves standing at crossroads at various stages of life. The oppositional forces are always there to create this existential anguish. Desai's characters are special in the sense that they find it very difficult to connect authentically to 'others' as they find even very intimate relationships to be hostile to themselves. The relational gulf adds fuel to their lacerated existence: "Anita Desai's characters often suffer from a gnawing sense of disintegration within and a disjunction from the world around. They are acutely conscious of their inability to connect the fragments of their experience of time and selfhood in an integrated whole, by an antithesis in emotion and thinking, in reason and imagination within themselves" (Santosh Gupta 236). The absence of a desired presence makes them feel utterly lonely and they are left with dualistic state of mind foregrounding repression of innermost feelings/yearnings. Extending it further, it would not be wrong to say that the metaphysics of absence create a cyclic phenomenon wherein the metaphysics of presence seem overshadowed: "some conventional discursive dualisms, such as public/private, empire/nation, popular/elite and male/female. Her texts expose the constructed nature of such polarities" (Chakravarty 27). Life is imbued in complexity and it does not offer a single formula as its solution. It is this bewildering ambiguousness of life Desai's weltanschauung weaves and the signifying code suggests the same. Desai reflects on the tragic "gap" between the individuals who fail to become the carriers of positive values as they proceed on dialectic of desire to achieve a sense of negotiated meaning. The narrative involves them in a mutual "dialogue" of inter-subjective desire. Usually the characters are unable to achieve a sense of constitutive "otherness" owing to which all the conflict and suffering come into being.

Desai's fictional world offers a wide range of duality-ridden structures having strong psycho-semantic renderings/interpretations. Shyam M. Asnani feels that Desai's "fiction, as such, takes its form and tone from polarities, opposites and irreconcilables … Oddity, distortion of personality, dislocation of normal life, recklessness of behavior, morbidity of temperament, malignancy of motive- all together with the profound poetry of disorder, radical from of alienation, maladjustments and contradictions- seem to have been preserved as the best of great traditions" (6). The major dualities

woven in the fiction of Desai are of masculine vs. feminine, tradition vs. modernity, illusion vs. reality, self vs. other, oriental vs. occidental, rational vs. irrational, emotion vs. intellect, lack vs. desire, presence vs. absence, attachment vs. detachment etc. A.H. Tak suggests that Desai's fiction mirrors the duality of "oscillation between the two opposite poles of human experience: erotic urge and the spiritual quest" (117). These dualities become foregrounded with the use of the technique of counter-pointing one issue with the other connoting darker or brighter aspects of existence (with regard to the situation of women in India as portrayed in literature, see also Chanda; Turner; Waller). The supporting technical characteristics of her writing connected with the motif of dualities are of recurrent metaphors, metonymic parallelism, ironic reversals, frequent flashbacks, cultural coding, stream-of-consciousness symbolizing dissection of the psyche, etc. Her exploration centers on inner emotional world and psychic dilemmas of her individual characters, particularly of her women in all the novels. The psychic dilemmas are basically the result of an ever-evolving and ever-intensifying duality present in the narrative. Her characters always desire to get "freedom"-talking in existential context from the shackles of human society and are involved in an endless struggle to find out the basic truth of life which can show them the union of opposites manifesting a state of trance and tranquility. In our study we aim at exploring the dimension of illusion and reality dualism which, in turn, constitute the thematic conflict in the novel *In Custody.*

Before initiating a thematic discussion of the novel in the light of dimensions of duality, we consider an interpretation of the two concepts, i.e., illusion and reality. The word illusion refers to deception and delusion. It is seeing of something that does not really exist. Illusion refers to the action or an act of deceiving the bodily or the mental eye by what is unreal or false, deception, delusion, befooling. It also refers to the fact or condition of being deceived by false appearance, a false conception or idea, a deception, delusion and fancy. In illusion, the person deceives himself by believing what suits his convenience and which is removed from reality. So illusion is an opinion based on what we think is true or should, rather than on what is or will be. Illusions occur when percipient is deceived in identifying the object perceived. It can be due to the psychological processes that underlie the perception. The reality may be defined as the quality of being real or having an actual existence. It is the state of things as they are or appear to be, rather than as one might wish them to be. Similarly, many of the characters of Desai fashion an idealistic fiction to replace the frustrating reality. The novelist wants to hammer home the fact that human life is full of illusions and it is rather difficult to free it from all illusions. Illusions, though hazardous, provide a shelter from the hard facts of life. Illusions are saving graces and these provide soothing balm to the injuries inflicted by reality. Without illusion, life will appear to be exacting and excruciating forcing the individual to undesirable extremes. But one cannot shut one's eyes to the reality.

In Custody is a novel which is somewhat special in the fictional worldview of Desai as it offers a male protagonist (Deven Sharma) caught up in the dynamics of existential conflict in the narrative. This adds another quality dimension in the greatness of the novelist as she makes it clear that her forte is not restricted to the exploration of feminine sensibility only. Rather, her narrative is an attempt to unravel the reality which transcends the much ballooned boundary of gender and highlights the truth of human existence. The novel under scrutiny is potent with multifarious significations as the structuration of the novel involves multiple issues of significance: the novel attempts to "unravel the miasma of society's expectations from individuals sandwiched between desires and denials" (Mishra 86). Deven is a temporary lecturer in a small suburban town and the narrative details about him highlight that he is an unsuccessful teacher and ineffectual as a husband always looking for others to show him a wider and "ideal" sphere of life which is untroubled by mundane problems of existence. Jayita Sengupta sees him as "a 'feminine' who acquires 'masculine' values to bear the responsibilities of preserving an old Urdu poet's verses and the cultural tradition to which he belongs, that is slowly being swallowed up by the postcolonial modernism" (232). The semantic journey of Deven manifests a change in outlook and understanding of life as he commutes between the sleepy, drab Mirapore and Delhi, the city of his dreams. The setting of the novel is important with regard to the latent meaning of the narrative which foregrounds the "mode of self-realization" for the main protagonist of the novel. Trying to arrange an interview with Nur — the poet — he discovers the futility of seeking a perfect/idealized world: "Fantasy lies in the narrative which combines the realistic and the romantic modes" (Jain, "In Pursuit" 53). We find him shedding his illusions towards the end of the narrative to

harness the inner resources for achieving a meaningful existence within the available existential periphery. Deven may be considered as one of the most self-actualized of Desai's characters and not only moves towards personal maturity but also uses it to assign meaning to an otherwise mundane and prosaic existence. Deven's initial sense of frustration of life is traceable to his escapist tendencies. He yearns incessantly for liberation from his circumstantial reality which offer him problematics of adjustment with the "given": "The dichotomy between the real and the fantastic generates tension in the mind" (Pathak 99). This realization makes him understand that the kind of freedom / liberation he was aspiring was nothing more than a land of illusions. Coming to terms of understanding with reality may be challenging but is certainly of crucial significance contextualizing actualized existence. This kind of understanding helps Deven's transition from dependence to self-reliance and provides him the courage to own the circumstantial responsibility soulfully in order to find meaning in authentic life.

With regard to the significance of childhood influences in the fictional worldview of Desai, Deven's character also requires certain dissection in the stated regard as the same plays a significant role in constructing/influencing his adult life. Deven's sensitivity to his father's failure is explicit in the narrative: the picture of his father which he retains for the rest of his life is of a shriveled, asthmatic person in a musty coat with torn pockets. He remembers his perpetually apologetic attitude towards his wife "who had expected more from a husband and felt grievously disappointed at the little he made of his life" (73). The image of the father instills a desire in Deven to avoid similar situation in his own life owing to which he always dreams a different world which is capable of fulfilling his "idealized" and "fantasized" role expectations from his own self thereby resulting in the creation of a gulf between illusion and reality. Deven becomes a machine of desire as his tendency becomes stronger with the progression of the narrative. A nagging, accusing wife, an ever demanding son, the need to earn living for supporting the family, the consequent necessity of taking up a job merely to earn money are some of the distinctive features of middle class mundane existence which he had always detested. After having a feeling of getting too stuck up in the so-felt existential trap, he experiences a stronger desire to escape thereby becoming a victim to the dialectics of illusion and reality. Life sounds to be a prison house for him thereby depriving him of the much desired freedom to move into a wider world.

The use of poetry in the narrative may also be referred to as a tool of thematic significance with special reference to the dialectics of illusion and reality. The poetic world as structured in the narrative offers as a counter-point to the realistic world of bread and butter for a common layman. Deven comes to associate the quoted wider world with world of poetry. The character of Nur is another point of mirroring similarity between Deven and his father as the same remains tactically common to both of them. Deven feels that the world of Nur and his poetry with its entire connotative plethora was quite different than the one filled with ordinary blockades and frustrations which his everyday existence offers to him. The "literary yearnings" (25) in which Deven feels thwarted by his circumstances are actually escapist in intent and fire his imagination with an illusory concept of a life. Deven's character offers a tragic gap between the real self of an average middle-class man and the idealized self associated with a literary man. This is a typical Desai's counter-point technique to bring forth the real problematics of existence. Such an opposed role expectations cause an identity-crisis in the personality of Deven as he is also sub-consciously aware of his worthlessness at failing to measure up to his prime duties of a householder and teacher. This crucial awareness makes him weak-willed and ineffectual: "Deep down his rage, in a way, an externalization of self-hate born out of an unconscious self-accusation. He reproaches himself for his inadequacy to make his distinction in life … all he could measure up to was this shabby house, its dirty corners, its wretchedness and lovelessness" (Bande 156). Deven's wife Sarla offers a counter-point to his illusionary world as she can see through by being mocking, disparaging, and scornful in her attitude for him: "The contrast or distance between the husband, Deven and the wife, Sarla, is presented suggestively when he recollects that she was not his choice but, that of his mother and aunts who were crafty and virtuous" (Gupta, R.K. 132). She is presented more through her gestures, rather than actions, and hence, represents the picture of an abandoned wife. On the other hand, Deven's reticence proves to be a hurdle which propels his problems further: "The protagonists of Anita Desai suffer from lack of ability to communicate their ideas to the members of the family or to their life partners" (Chand and Suscela 74) and the "unsaid forces the reader to re-evaluate the purpose of communication in an individual

context throughout the book which, paradoxically, explicitly illustrates the methods of articulation and response" (Bhandari 183).

Deven also proves to a professional failure as he fails to maintain a rapport with his students in his college. Deven can be seen as "Trishanku who gets caught and suspended in two opposing and equally strong forces" (Singh 89). The motif of escapism as mirrored in his familial domain has a similarity in relation to his professional sphere. Instead of relating to the students in class, he ignores them by focusing his eyes "upon the far end of the room, the door that opened on the passage, freedom and release" (12). He represents "boredom, amusement, insolence, defiance" (12) for the students which further leaves a crumbling effect on his existence. Lacking a firm sense of identity, Deven exhibits a remarkable inability: "The protagonist of the novel is in his own custody." (Chakranarayan 75). The novel presents a crucial relationship between Deven and Murad which highlights a sense frustration even in the mind of the reader about the existential plight of the protagonist of the novel. Murad is a childhood acquaintance of Deven and Deven views him as the editor of a leading "Literary Urdu Journal" — a signifier for his projected/desired illusionary world — hence a part of the world he longs for. Contrary to this, the idealized world of Murad exploits the discrepancy in the personality of Deven by offering a tantalizing hope of escape into a different world. Murad's reference to the "glorious tradition of Urdu literature" (15) and the "need to protect it in this era of—that vegetarian monster, Hindi" (15) makes Deven "shrink back and shrivel in his chair for hindi was what he taught" (15). Deven is set to distinguish himself from Murad's point of view. He is reduced to the stature of secretary; led into buying a second hand and ineffective piece of machinery for the recording of his interview with Nur, etc. Deven's lack of integrity is conspicuous as he is not able to assert himself which results in acute discontent and instability. While his frustration arouses his anger, the feeling of inadequacy threatening to break through arouses anxiety in Deven and the same convinces him to escape into another realm which he associates with freedom from his mundane existence. However, the genesis of maturity in Deven's world lies also in the failure of his glorified dreamland. There is a constant fear sourced from a subconscious awareness of the possibility of the illusion not measuring up to reality. However, Deven's subconscious awareness is overcome by the thrilling prospect of meeting Nur, "his hero" (25), "the life of his mind" (34). Deven projects Nur's world as "another realm it would surely be, if his God dwelt there, the domain of poetry, beauty and illumination, a wondrously illuminated era in contrast to the meanness and dross of his past existence" (40).

Nur is a representation of illusion for Deven. However, his journey of realization passes through a series of illuminary intervals. The world of Nur is sharply counter-pointed to the projected one by Deven. It is an atmosphere of garishness, crude ribaldry, blaring music, the cacophonous sounds of the bye-lanes of Chandni Chowk resided by pimps and prostitutes. Nur is a "senile and debilitated man, presiding over a court of louts and lechers" (Bande 158). Torn between the rival claims of two wives, he is reduced to non-entity in his own home and his identity remains under constant threat: "This, in fact, indicates the gap between illusion and reality. Deven lives in the illusion of reality that the Urdu poet should be like a God and his words must be poetry itself, but what he finds in reality is a filthy, vulgar person" (Sharma 124). Deven's coming to terms with reality is all the more difficult as "he does not want to tarnish this image (idealized image of Nur) because if it is damaged, Deven will be doomed. It will mean demise of Deven's glorified self" (Bande 158). The process of bridging the gap between "organismic experiences and falsified values" (Massey 313) proves to be a painful one, but is valuable in terms of freedom from dependence on a false ideal. Deven's awareness proceeds gradually from the subconscious to the conscious level. However, the dialectic is automatized in the narrative offering him a combination of negation and affirmation. On his way back to Mirapore after his first visit to Nur, Deven reflects, "Dawn and poetry .. all that was simply 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" (63). The second visit further affirms the collapsing world of Nur as idealized by Deven. The poet's pathetic account of his circumstances with special reference to his second wife Imtiaz Begum's robbing him of his house, audience, and friends gives another blow to the world of illusions as projected by Deven. Desai gives an interesting account of the culmination of Deven's second visit and says "he scrambled to his feet, and turned and fled" (90).

During the third and last visit to Nur's place, Deven is prepared mentally to look at the things objectively. During this visit Deven transcends from hurling himself down the stairs to walking out with dignified deliberation into fresh air and sunlight. It symbolizes his transition from running away from reality which threatens his illusions to recognize the truth and consciously rejecting the idealized world of illusions. However, his assimilation of reality also foregrounds a challenging awareness of his own discrepancies and he reflects how he tried "to search always for solace when there was other game to hunt in the forest. Had he had more spirit, more nerve, more desire and ambition, then perhaps he would have instead hunted for success, distinction, magic. Perhaps published a book himself, earned a name for himself, a little fame, even gold bangles for Sarla" (128). He suffers from self-deprecation as he realizes how "every effort he had made ended in defeat. Most of the poems he had written and sent to Murad had been rejected … his wife and son eyed him with blatant disappointment, nor had he won the regard of his colleagues and students" (128). His experience with Nur teaches him that the circumstantial fetters which he had yearned to escape were a part of life and hence inescapable at any level. Life, he feels "was only a kind of zoo in which he could not hope to find freedom, he would only blunder into another cage inhabited by some other trapped animal" (131).

There is some fresh intuition in Deven which propels him to move beyond his earlier pattern of life: "Consciousness still had its fine twisted hooks in his flesh and gave another and another tug" (132). There is steady shift from a sense of self-devaluation and his degrading view of himself as an animal in the cage to a growing confidence in himself as an independent entity. He comes to reach an understanding that there is always one freedom which cannot be denied to anyone which is a freedom to choose speaking in existentialist parlance: "Between his boyish expectations and Nur's grim reality he discovers a new lease of life, dignity, and the way of fulfillment of his dreams" (Singh, Anita 149). Deven comes closer to the recognition of truth when he feels that it was only in drearily dredging through "this turbid, churned up ocean" (161) that some treasure could be netted offering a more realistic perspective of looking for something worthwhile within the existing scheme of things: "The misleading egoistic propulsions are assimilated in the substantial and more concrete demands of life" (Parmar 167). It now leads to the achievement of meaningful direction in life. Deven's choice of committing himself to the task of becoming the custodian of Nur's poetry is a crucial point towards the end of the novel. It emanates from a gradual awareness of the need to provide meaning in life.

Deven returns to Mirapore is a changed person and travel and distance are important aspects here: "In Desai's novels, the distance travelled in external time or space is extremely limited, but the distance travelled in terms of emotional experiences, revaluations, placing and replacing of ties leaves one with a feeling of having experienced both loss and gain very much like the ordeal of Prometheus" (Jain, *Stairs* 303). He is no longer irritated by Sarla's accusing look nor the shabbiness of the clothes or the sight of her labor: "*In Custody* reveals a man who understands the trauma of his wife" (Singh, Sunaina 124) and he accepts this as "part of his own humiliation" (193). He gives up past constructs and opts for striving to find meaning in life. Walking along the canal in the early hours of the morning, he ruminates that if he could establish a bond with Nur and his poetry, "it would give him a reason and strength to survive whatever came" (203). This wish is no longer an escapist one in intent as he realizes that the alliance entails responsibility and courage to face problems. It reflects maturity and a break with illusions brightens the prospect of achieving a direction in the real world by instilling a unique optimism. Deven possesses an orientation towards growth and a relative flexibility of attitude and this helps him in correcting his distorted perspective and accepting reality. His personal growth involves in itself the awareness and the acceptance of the limitations of human existence and finding means to achieve fulfillment within them. Deven moves from self-deception to self-perception and achieves a sense of maturity and integration. He comes to know that peace is not found in the external conditions, but within oneself, and the finding of tranquility within oneself is possible only when one lives a life of self-conscious awareness of one's being, an awareness that stimulates the growth of inner resources and inner strength. Deven is a typical manifestation of dualistic monism as he is able to see reality as a unified whole asserting that this whole essentially expresses itself in dualistic terms. He is able to understand that the essential unity is that of complementary polarities which are co-substantial in transcendent sense. The journey of Deven is about the search and re-search of his own identity with regard to the exploration of meaning of his identity. He journeys

towards an understanding of his own relational placement/situationality in order to understand relationships. The desire to fill in the existential gaps can certainly be seen in him as psychic agony and his desire is relevant in his later rejuvenation and re-negotiation of his self and his relationships. Deven experiences positive resolution at the end of the novel wherein all dualities collapse and are negotiated resulting in the conversion of meaninglessness into meaningfulness: "Repentance, obligation, and commitment are properly ethical categories and they come into play after a 'leap' or 'conversion' experience that is an exercise of free choice and thus an individuating act" (Flynn 31).

To conclude, *In Custody* offers a subtle transcendence of existence which is symbolic of a convergence of all contradictory pulls which split the protagonist apart throughout the narrative thereby foregrounding a motif of epiphany: "It should be said to the credit of Desai that she has created for the first time in Indian English fiction a figure like Nur, a poet born out of nervousness, impatience and regret, and a lecturer like Deven, who comes alive with his fragmented personality" (Inamdar 153). The novel is rich with material for multi-level reading and interpretation and touches on linguistic, political, and cultural issues, for example the counter-points of home, family, and friendship, the metaphor of abandonment through the symbolism of trap, dust, heat, ironic reversals, deception, etc.

Note: The above article is an excerpt from Narinder K. Sharma, *Interpreting Duality: A Study of Selected Fiction of Anita Desai*. Ph.D. diss. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev U, Forthcoming. Copyright release to the author.

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