

# Presences and Absences: Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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**Abstract**—Anita Desai's *In Custody* explores presences within absences and absences within presences. The protagonist, Deven, teaches Hindi, but his true passion is Urdu. He idealizes a vanishing past, which forces him to confront a miserable present. His idol, Nur Shahjehanabadi, is a renowned Urdu poet and a relic of the old courtly culture. Nur is caught in revelry, torn between a forgotten past and a painful present. Deven tries to revive the dying language and highlight its presence by making Nur's works accessible. Materialistic obstacles hinder him and nearly cause failure. Despite many absences, Deven gains a presence by becoming the custodian of Nur's unpublished works. This article examines Deven's existential angst, which drives him toward absence. In the process, the article applies the views of Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger to critique Deven's predicament.

**Index Terms**—Dasein, Sisyphus, absurd, Kafkasian

## I. INTRODUCTION

Born and raised in Delhi, Anita Desai is known for portraying real experiences rather than romanticized imagination. Besides writing children's literature, she also examines adult struggles through psychological realism. Her detached observations and realistic characters reflect her mixed heritage—a German mother and an Indian father. As she says in her interview with Bliss and Desai (1988), "I feel about India as an Indian, but I suppose I think about it as an outsider" (p. 527). Anita Desai's works explore the individual's search for meaning, authenticity, and transcendence in a world filled with absurdity, unreliability, and inferiority. Maya, in *Cry, The Peacock*, faces patriarchy, loneliness, and alienation. She experiences an existential crisis and searches for purpose in an indifferent world. 'Voices' in *Voices in the City* is the inner turmoil of characters who feel unheard and disconnected from their roots. They yearn for self-realization. These characters live in a city of millions yet remain lonely and depressed. Solitude recurs throughout Desai's earlier works. Rushdie (1984), in his introduction to *In Custody*, notes, "Her most memorable early creations—the old woman, Nanda Kaul, in *Fire on the Mountain*, or Bim in *Clear Light of Day*—were isolated, singular figures" (viii IC). "In Anita Desai's novels there is a shift from the collective to the personal, from the communal to the individual" (Mitra, 2024). This can be attributed to Desai's use of psychological focalization in her characterization. Her novels focus on characters' internal worlds rather than external events. Female interiority and gender-based subjugation lead to internal dialogues for her characters. The conflict between inner desires and outer obligations is a recurring theme in much of Desai's work.

*In Custody* is Anita Desai's seventh novel. The author deliberately moves away from her earlier themes. She explains to Gee (2004), "But I could not realistically have women characters just pushing open the doors of the world, so I had to write about men" (p. 9). Deven Sharma, the protagonist of *In Custody*, teaches Hindi, but his passion is Urdu. His inner self urges him to follow this passion and help his beloved language. However, everyday realities and family obligations pose obstacles. Deven's journey toward his true self is filled with challenges that make it difficult. Researchers have analyzed this novel using themes such as existential angst, language politics, language commodification, meaninglessness, marginalization, and the socio-cultural context of post-partition India.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critics have approached *In Custody* from various angles, with significant discourse centered on language politics, gender dynamics, and existential themes. Yaqin (2004), in her article titled 'The Communalization and Disintegration of Urdu in Anita Desai's *In Custody*', posits startling questions about the treatment of Urdu by Anita Desai. Yaqin (2004) reads this novel "as a literary narration of the communalization and disintegration of Urdu in post-partition India" (p. 121). Quoting renowned Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, she contends that Urdu poetry "was concerned with forging themes of modernity." However, for the writer of *In Custody*, Urdu "is trapped in an aristocratic lineage" (p. 121). Das (2023), echoing this sentiment, argues that the idea that Urdu, "encapsulated as a tradition to be remembered rather than taken forward and allowed to foster in the society," allows people to impose their custodianship over the language (p. 4). Whereas in common parlance, Urdu is known as the language of love, as a popular adage goes: 'if you want to fall in love, learn Urdu, or if you want to learn Urdu, fall in love'. The treatment of Urdu as a cultural artifact in *In Custody*, the romantic idealization of the language, and tying it up with partition and Muslim migration render the language ineffective as a lingua franca. The geographical reconstruction of Mirpore, the town in the novel, includes references to temples,

mosques, and festivals. These references point to the larger issue of the Hindu-Muslim divide, which suggests one community as timeless against the later arrival of another (Yaqin, 2004). In the same vein, Sethi (2023) also examines the communalization of Hindi and Urdu after partition. She suggests moving beyond purist ideas of language as professed by Deven and Nur in the novel. Nostalgic remembrance of what once was, and victim ideology will not help the cause of Urdu. Instead, the Forsterian idea of "only connect" can bridge gaps and offer hope (p. 48). Sharma (2012) also refers to the Urdu question. According to her, the writer presents a picture of Urdu's legacy and exposes the defeated cause of its promotion. She does so without causing any controversy or "polemical debates" (p. 181). The sense of relief at the absence of controversy points to evolving societal and political norms in the subcontinent. Exposing sensitive issues, as in *In Custody*, might have caused an uproar in present times. For example, a visiting scholar of Hindi and Urdu was denied entry into the country on technical grounds, reportedly for having views contrary to the establishment recently (The Hindu, 2025). Abdullatif and Taher (2022) see *In Custody* as a clash between old and new Indian culture. They lament how British rule and partition left an indelible mark on Indian culture. The shift from an art-loving people to a materialist mindset is troubling. The obstacles in Deven's journey to achieve higher goals are materialistic.

Moving on to gender dynamics, Anita Desai wanted to write about men in *In Custody*, but she "found all these women whom I had locked out were screaming and thumping on the door and demanding to come in" (Gee, 2004). Arasteh and Pirnajmuddin (2014) found this 'screaming woman' in Imtiaz Begum, the second wife of the poet Nur, in *In Custody*. She strives to find her own identity by choosing a path usually treaded by men in patriarchal post-colonial Indian society. She chooses Urdu poetry to challenge male dominance in the field and make her voice heard. Bhabha's concept of 'mimicry' has been applied to critique this character. Critiquing her attempts to mimic and conquer a traditionally male bastion, Malik (2025) hails her as the 'new woman' who is "driven, independent and power hungry" (p. 107). Deven's wife, Sarla, is not power-hungry, but she has her own dreams that she cannot materialize. Examining her condition, Ara (2023) says that the "relationship between male and female characters clearly develops as a hierarchical one and shares the same disparities as that of the colonizer and the colonized" (p. 247). In a similar argument, Drishti and Srivastava (2024) see Sarla as embodying the challenges of navigating patriarchal structures that confine women to roles of "domesticity and subservience" (p. 1764).

Sharma (2012) analyzes *In Custody* through the dualism of illusion and reality. Sharma argues that Deven's search for meaning is marked by his struggle to reconcile his imagined aspirations with the limitations of his real life. His desire for freedom is ultimately undermined by self-deception. According to Sharma, Deven's journey culminates in a resolution in which the dualities of illusion and reality collapse, resulting in a unified sense of self. To use Sethy et al.'s (2024) terms, Deven's journey can be seen as originating in escapism and culminating in realism.

Baena Molina (2000) sees *In Custody* as a campus novel. It fits patterns such as a comic and satiric tone, a naïve-scholar protagonist, and an episodic plot. This novel broadens the cultural and thematic range of the sub-genre. It does so by treating life seriously and highlighting the protagonist's idealistic attempts to preserve Urdu and a culturally rich past.

Dvorak (2009) argues that Anita Desai's multicultural background enables her to portray Indian society with empathy and critical distance. Dvorak highlights three key concepts in *In Custody*: hybridity—the mixing of cultures; intertextuality, or references to other texts and traditions; and creolization—the formation of new identities from cultural mixing. Desai's perspective brings together pre- and post-partition Indian cultures, as well as poetic traditions from the West and the East. Dvorak writes, "*In Custody* can be considered to be the very epitome of the ever-shifting syncretic hybridity resulting from cross-fertilization or cultural mixing" (pp. 95–106).

Thus, Anita Desai is seen as a writer of human consciousness, feelings, emotions, inner conflicts, and outer obligations. There is an amazing variety of perspectives applied to the critique of *In Custody*. Existentialist concepts such as existential angst, alienation, isolation, illusion, and reality have also been used to analyze this novel. However, Sartre's theory of 'presence vs absence' has not yet been applied to it. I have taken up the same to fill this gap.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative analytical framework based on existentialist theory. Sartre's 'presences vs absences' is the primary tool to examine *In Custody*. The article will show how Deven, the novel's protagonist, faces his absences. His attempts to fill his unfulfilled desires turn absences into presences and lead to near-fatal consequences. The views of Camus, Kafka, and Heidegger also help critique Deven's situation.

### IV. DISCUSSION

Time is not a thing; thus, nothing which is, and yet it remains constant in its passing away, without being something temporal like the beings in time. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

Just as time is finite and comes to an end, so too did the heyday of Urdu, which gradually lost the charm it had enjoyed before the partition of India and Pakistan. Its essence, distilled in Urdu poetry, stays constant. That is the presence in the absence of the language. Urdu is the thread that forms the woof and the wrap of Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984). Deven, the protagonist, has set himself a goal in life - to keep Urdu poetry alive. As Desai herself admits in an interview with Guignery and Tadie (2009): "The world I grew up in was that of old Delhi in which one still heard Urdu poetry being recited," and for the writing of *In Custody*, she had to "create what I thought was great Urdu poetry" (p. 370). Such was

her compulsion to recreate the world that had gone by, and this she entrusted to her fictive self, Deven. She, at the end of the novel, made him the custodian of a rich heritage of unpublished verses of Urdu poetry of Nur Shahjehanabadi.

Sartre's theory of absences and presences posits that "absence" is as absolute as "presence". As we experience the presence of someone or something in life, we also feel the absence, and this, in turn, shapes our experiences. This article will show how Deven, the protagonist of the novel *In Custody*, confronts his absences and how his attempts to realize his unfulfilled desires lead to near-fatal consequences.

Deven is caught between two languages, Hindi, and Urdu; the former is his livelihood, while the latter is his passion. He could not turn his passion into a profession because, as Desai states in her interview, "very few Hindus studied Urdu, or wrote or read it. So it seemed to me it was a threatened language, and I think since those pre-partitioned days, the number of schools and universities that offer Urdu is very few now" (p. 373). Nevertheless, since she believed that efforts were needed to preserve it, she weaves this concern into her novel, giving Deven this duality that leads to his existential angst. Sartre argues that individuals shape their identities through their existence, and they cannot be fully understood by preconceived categories or definitions. For Deven, his essence is deeply tied to Urdu, even though his existence unfolds in the realm of Hindi. Just as Sartre suggests that existence precedes essence, Deven's identity is formed in the tension between his circumstances and his true passion. Deven exists in an environment hostile to his true self. A meek and timid character, Deven finds himself immersed in poverty and helplessness throughout the novel, *In Custody*. Pursuing his passion, Deven cannot escape the duality he has fallen into. Yet, despite his material limitations, he achieves a certain spiritual freedom by confronting his presence and entering a world of absences, which is his true commitment—his essence.

The novel is set in Mirpore, a perhaps nowhere region in Northern India, where, ironically, Deven teaches Hindi, subjugating his essence and by doing so making it an absence in his lived presence. Sartre (1948) notes that man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. This idea highlights Deven's struggle: he is entrapped, nearly enslaved, and seeks out a meagre sustenance, his lived identity shaped by circumstance but not determined by it. Shackled with a wife whom he does not love, Sarla, "a plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic" (IC 69) being who also loves him not. They are forced into a marriage. Even the surroundings of his unhappy home are uncongenial, littered with garbage, and inhospitable. Thus, it is no wonder that Deven is driven within himself to nourish and nurture his absences rather than reconcile with the presences. His innerscape, contrastingly, is rich, aesthetically resplendent, and surrealistic, wherein he venerates Urdu poetry and his idol, Nur, an Urdu poet. As the poet's name means, he is the 'divine light' illuminating his essence, which makes his disheveled life recede into the shadows.

Urdu thus connects the two phases of Deven's life—Mirpore and Old Delhi. The journey from one to the other is his transition from his outerscape to his innerscape, from presence to absence. It is very symbolic, having been affected by a chance meeting with his school-time friend, Murad, who comes in search of him, believing he can interview Nur Shahjehanabadi for his magazine, *Awaaz*. Deven distrusts Murad the "chameleon" (IC 30), and yet he is coaxed into the proposal for Murad plays on Deven's dream, his essence, hitherto dwelling in shadows and now on the verge of seeing the light of day. Could he bring Urdu alive?

Defunct is Deven's presence, just as his absence seems to be. To revive it comes an opportunity beyond his ken. Despite the upheaval it might cause his present, Deven agrees to travel the road not taken and goes in search of what is not. One is reminded of Camus's (1955) philosophy of the absurd, which posits juxtaposition between the fundamental human desire to find meaning in life and the unreasonable logic of the world, its volte-face. Camus's option is not to annihilate oneself at the altar of materiality but to revolt, protest against circumstances, and actualize one's desires and fight to live life on one's own terms. Like Camus's Sisyphus, Deven defies the norms of what is expected of him in order to accomplish what he believes in. Like Sisyphus, Deven was hitherto destined to live a meaningless life, rolling out Hindi lessons day in and day out to an audience scarce interested in his attempts—a ceaseless, pointless endeavour symbolizing the futility of his life. The offer from Murad is his ticket out of this wretched condition. As Camus (1955) answers the question "How should an absurd man live?" in Chapter 2: *The Absurd Man* (p. 67), there are no ethical rules that apply, for there is no justification for quitting his patterned life, however sapping. Attaining one's dreams has no need for rules, "everything is permitted" (p. 68). Kafka writes in his diary that he was, "Enclosed in my own four walls, I found myself as an immigrant, imprisoned in a foreign country... I saw my family as strange aliens whose foreign customs, rites, and the very language defied comprehension..." (as cited in Preece, 2001, p. 16). Deven too has existential angsts; he too suffers from a Kafkaesque disorientation and the menacing complexity of life.

From Mirpore to Delhi, from a place of isolation with no history of its own, "lacking a river", symbolizing "total dehydration" (IC 14, 15), suggestive of lack of fertility and creativity, "an impassable desert" (IC 18), to Delhi, old Delhi, is like a passage to eternity where his loved Urdu still dwells. In Mirpore, "he had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence" (IC 20), which was his presence, "with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings. The latter was constantly assaulted and wrecked by the former" (IC 20). Murad, bringing out the Urdu magazine *Awaaz* and keeping "a rich and glorious tradition alive" (IC 8), feels superior and chastises Deven for his betrayal. It is for the likes of Deven that the Urdu language "now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city" (IC 8). Deven is haunted by this guilt and thus submits to Murad's goading and lets his fancy supersede his commitments, and raises himself from the dust. Murad comes like a "comet... swift and pale in the dark like a bird of the night" (IC 11).

Sartre (1956) also points out that “an individual is constantly in search of a way to confront a purposeless and absurd world... the feeling of nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm” (p. 52). This nothingness, for Sartre, is not a passive void but an active force shaping human reality. As he writes, “Non-being is always an aspect of being, and it is the human being who brings nothingness into the world” (p. 21). Deven embodies this existential dynamic. He fails to be effective in the new culture and to be adept in his culture of origin. He oscillates between presence and absence, revealing how human consciousness is marked by perpetual lack and the longing to fill it.

Though self-doubt and distrust of Murad trigger a chain of thwarting thoughts, what if “Murad had not meant any of what he had said...” (IC 22), Deven takes an uncharted journey and reaches Delhi. With unfamiliar poise, he paces forward to find Murad’s office amongst the labyrinth of the historic city. With a letter of statement, he stands in front of “tightly shut wooden doors set into straight, faded walls”(IC 34). Ominous forebodings loom large as “an immense voice, cracked and hoarse and thorny” asks with annoyance, “who is it that disturbs the sleep of the aged at this hour of the afternoon that is given to rest?” (IC 35). Even so he climbs the flight of stairs as if, “angels might have been drawing up these ancient splintered stairs to meet the deity...” (IC 36). This is the place from where will come the “summons for which he had been waiting these empty years...” (IC 36).

Face-to-face with his deity, he is appalled by the contrariness of his imagination. Confronted by a bulky man, surrounded by vulgar, unruly parasites, his fancy is tarnished. As Dalmia (1979) puts it, “Nur has lost his sense of dignity and sanctity of the self and, becoming vulnerable, he has been contaminated” (p. 13). The total ambience of the habitation is nauseating. Feelings of despondency and disillusionment dismember Deven as he witnesses Nur gorging on food, drinking, and then throwing up and lying in his own filth, thoughts of fleeing flay his mind. Every effort of his to connect with this discordant presence once again is contrary to his imagined haven and a bigger blow to his dubious self.

Deven had nurtured this love for Urdu since childhood, inheriting it from his ailing, asthmatic father, who was equally at odds with the world. Moreover, even then, he had to opt for an alternative for his livelihood. Then he was shackled with a mismatched wife. His dreams, “twisted into nightmare” (IC 64), once again defeat him, and he returns to Mirpore. However, a postcard summons him back with Nur’s proposal to be his secretary. All because he had recited verbatim with pronounced accuracy, verse after verse of Nur’s poetry. This was not “a great honour... a golden chance to learn the art of poetry from a great master?” (IC 79). Deven succumbs to realizing his absence.

The second visit is equally disastrous. Deven gets embroiled in a series of mishaps before Nur agrees to the interview. Scheduled in a brothel, with the parasites as audience hovering en masse, Nur recites as a rapt Deven listens, and then the icing on the cake as Nur bequeaths his unpublished verses. However, there are still too many slips in the actualization of his legacy. Successive failures plunge him into despair yet again: “every effort he had made had ended in defeat” (IC 142). Retreat was inevitable, but fate had destined otherwise. Another invitation to copy down the poet’s new cycle of couplets puts him into a dilemma. Would not Safia, Nur’s first wife, try to fleece him with more demands for money? Was he not already broke because of these expensive visits?

The interview ultimately fails — the recording machine proves to be a disaster, as does Nur’s drunken incoherence. To top it all off, the College Board court-martials him. All is black and absurd. Sisyphus cannot break the relentless cycle of misery; his boulder yet again rolls down the hill despite his pushing it up. Suicide? Just then, the sight of the Mosque rising high above symbolically scaffolds his flagging morale. The statement against the skies that the Mosque makes, leaving behind the lowly houses beneath, is his love for Urdu, which the lame inhabitants of this worldly mundaneness would fail to recognize.

## V. CONCLUSION

As Heidegger (1927) says, “Being and Time determine each other reciprocally but in such a manner that neither can the former — Being — be addressed as something temporal nor can the latter — Time — be addressed as a Being” (p. 3). In the same way, absences and presences are inversely proportional to each other. Both can make or mar the other. Deven, then, is a Dasein (Heidegger’s being there) and, as such, provides access to the meaning of being a temporal entity in the world, subject to its forces until time, the finite mortal vantage, takes over. The absences in Deven’s life determine his presences and vice versa. The past ascribes itself to his present, and the present drives him to his past. Thus, life goes on. A lone spark makes life livable. Deven’s custodianship of Nur’s poetry is the patina that his passing had provided, making his absence sparkle in his presence. Lucy (2004) explains the Derridean term “aporia,” which can never be deconstructed, as being an “impassable path” that is like travelling from presences to absences and from absences to presences — a logical contradiction.

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