Anita Desai’s *In Custody* and the English Legacy

Colette Selles

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/ces/8925
DOI: 10.4000/ces.8925
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher
SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 April 2009
Number of pages: 116-123
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference
Colette Selles, “Anita Desai’s *In Custody* and the English Legacy”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 31.2 | 2009, Online since 24 December 2021, connection on 12 April 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ces/8925, DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8925

*Commonwealth Essays and Studies* is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.
Anita Desai’s In Custody and the English Legacy

This paper shows how Desai’s novel illustrates the legacy left by the British Empire in an ambivalent way: it pays tribute to English literature, and at the same time uses the (former) colonizer’s language to emphasize the changes and disruption the subcontinent has inherited from British presence and departure. Through the central protagonist the novel stages a difficult positioning in a post-Independence and post-Partition India faced with new forms of hegemony.

Anita Desai’s mixed background is often evoked. She had a Bengali father and a German mother, and went to St Mary’s, a missionary school in Delhi. She was immersed in Western culture, listened to Western music (Costa 1), read “the 19th century Russian novelists, French and German literature, and of course the English classics”, she says (Libert 1). She moreover describes the society she lived in as multicultural: “[a]s a little girl I lived in a Delhi made up of three communities. The Hindu was dominant, but the skyline was full of Islamic monuments. Urdu literature was in the air—poetry recited, ghazals sung—and the British still had a presence, affecting me through school and the books I read” (Jaggi 5). She insists on the upheavals linked to Partition, which was marked by violent conflicts between the Hindu and Muslim communities, and the exodus of millions of people, and which – besides political unrest - has left an enduring personal trauma: “[t]hat sense of loss and drama have pursued me ever since” (Jaggi 5).

In Custody seems to originate from this sense of loss. The novel focuses on the protagonist’s nostalgia for the glorious times of Urdu poetry embodied by the poet Nur, as Urdu is threatened with extinction by what the characters feel to be the new hegemony of Hindi. The narrative revolves around Deven Sharma, a Hindu educated in the love of Urdu but who has to teach Hindi in the College of Mirpore, a small town on the periphery of Delhi. Through Deven who is fettered by the necessity of providing for his family, the novel highlights the tension between ideals and reality. Besides, the anticlimax resulting from the idealization of Urdu (and Nur) confronted with the poet’s decline mirrors the consequences of the new political and socio-cultural reality engendered by Independence and Partition. With the intermingling of politics and language, and radical divisions (Urdu being associated with Muslims and Hindi with Hindu India), the new reality implies communal strife and the decline and death of a language and culture, represented by the Urdu poet’s own decay.

In 1833, in a speech on the Indian Bill in the House of Commons, Thomas Macaulay declared:

The sceptre may pass away from us.[…] Victory may be inconstant to our arms. But there are triumphs which are followed by no reverse. […] These are the pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism; that empire is the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws. (Mukherjee Epigraph)

Emblematic as they are of the colonialist discourse of the day, Macaulay’s words seem to be confirmed – to a certain extent - by Indian writing in English. Anita Desai acknowledges her debt to English literature: “Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, D.H.Lawrence. They were my models […]” (Costa 4). In Custody illustrates this
Anita Desai's *In Custody* and the English Legacy

influence on her writing and her reverence for English poetry, as evinced from the outset by the epigraph taken from Wordsworth and by a text brimming with intertextual echoes of, and quotations from English poets and writers. Moreover, Anita Desai's choice of English as the linguistic medium of her works constitutes one of the facets of the legacy left by British rule in India, a cultural legacy with a political dimension. The introduction of English in higher education was based on the assumption of the superiority of English, as stated by Macaulay in his “Minute on Indian Education” in 1835: “We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them a foreign language. The claims of our language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West.” Language was a political instrument serving the aims of the colonial enterprise: “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” In Anita Desai's novel, the recitations of Shelley's “Ode to a Skylark”, and Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (IC 171) by Nur testify to the impact of the education devised by the colonizer. If the English intertext is inscribed in the novel in an explicit way with quotations from Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth, it is also more implicit, based on allusions. The description of Mirpore is reminiscent of the scenery of Chandrapore in the first page of Forster's *A Passage to India*. The toponym Mirpore echoes Chandrapore, and Forster’s “monotonous”, bleak atmosphere created with dysphoric elements such as “the rubbish”, “filth”, the recurrence of mud (“The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving” [Forster 29]) seems to subtext the “debris and the litter” (IC 16), the “ubiquitous dust of Mirpore” (IC 13). This “ubiquitous dust”, the image of the “desert”, of the “strip of no-man's land”, this “desolation” (IC 18), Mirpore’s “dehydration” (15), all these images also recall T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

N. K. Narayan, one of the three “founding fathers” of the Indian novel in English underlined the gap first felt between the English culture they were taught at school and their own, giving the example of the alphabet: “from the Sanskrit alphabet we passed on directly to […] A was an Apple Pie […] The […] line was mystifying. What was an Apple Pie?” (Narayan 120). Authenticity is an issue which has often been raised as regards Indian writing in English. Rao notably declared “[o]ne has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own” (Trivedi 109). Siddiqui, the head of the Urdu Department at Mirpore College and one of the representatives of Urdu in *In Custody*, is attributed a remark alluding to novels, a genre coming from the West. In his words there is, combined with a sense of the superiority of Urdu literature, an emphasis on the alien character of fiction: “'You could always turn it into a work of imagination' […]. 'You know, a few facts

---
1. From "Rob Roy's Grave", *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland*: ‘…they should take, who have the power/ And they should keep who can.’
2. Thomas Macaulay was then a “member of the supreme council of the East India Company” (*Norton Topics Online* 1).
3. Ibid.
4. See Marta Dvorak's study of the intertext(s) in the novel.
5. “[I]t was in the 1930s that the Indian novel in English emerged as a sustained and significant genre; the three ‘founding fathers’ [were…] R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao” (Trivedi 108).
and fantasy. It is said to be a fashionable form in—in other parts of the world” (IC 104).

However, In Custody can be seen as an example of the appropriation of a genre and a language imported from Britain. The novel is immersed in the Indian context, and reflects crucial events in the history of the subcontinent: the 1857 Mutiny, Independence, Partition and their tragic consequences. In the wake of Rao who insisted “[w]e cannot write like the English. We should not” (Trivedi 109), Anita Desai, who said that she “always thought of [her]self as Indian, not European, because [she] was born and raised in India” (Libert 1), uses strategies to convey Indianness, which can be noticed in her descriptions of the streets of Delhi:

They walked past shady-looking and evil-smelling shops where herbal medicines and panaceas were being wrapped in paper packets by men who looked too ostentatiously like quacks, past booths in which astrologers and palmists and soothsayers had spread out the exotic tools of their trade—elaborately illustrated scrolls, mynah birds in cages, birth-stones and gems in open boxes—and pavement stalls where scarves and handkerchiefs and underwear were heaped in mounds of starched cotton, or thick glasses and enamel plates [. . .]. Deven [. . .] didn’t hear the frantic ringing of a rickshaw heavily loaded with parcels heading for the railway station. Its driver, acrobatic as a monkey with a red cap, managed to swerve in time, doing no more than running over Deven’s foot, but his parcels slid off the slippery rexine seat and were scattered over the street. […] (IC 32)

With their lexical abundance reinforced by polysyndeton creating an effect of hypotyposis, the rhythm and sounds produced by a mixture of plosives, liquids associated in assonances, alliterations, and rhymes, these sentences are an example of imitative harmony meant to reproduce and enhance the distinctiveness of Indian life. “I worked hard to bend the English language to bring in the sounds and tempo and rhythms of spoken languages around me, which are part of my world too. With English you can, it’s so flexible and elastic” (Jaggi 4), Anita Desai said, thus highlighting otherness and the—often stressed—“flexibility” of English which partly explains its status as an international language. Moreover, the novel is peppered with Indian terms such as “biryani” (IC 165), “paan” (IC 162) which, appearing in italics, further underscore a distinctive Indian reality, showing at the same time the limits of English, and invalidating the colonialist discourse of the past. As for Nur’s poetry, it never appears in Urdu, and if it sounds a bit awkward, it is because, as Catherine Pesso-Miquel argues, Desai is trying to create the illusion that these lines which are written in English are not English, actually (Pesso-Miquel 121). Yet, with the elements of Indianness bringing into relief the “exotic” quality of the Indian scene, Desai could be said to write within the traditional—colonialist—Western representation of the Indian Other.

In Custody, however, evinces a certain distance from colonial discourse. The narrative of the board meeting and the garden party organised in Deven’s college is suffused with irony, and is based on a combination of the burlesque and mock-heroic. The members of the board’s sense of their own importance is emphasized through a combination of effects, lexical items, visual images and rhythm linked to sound effects and stress pattern. First shown “hurrying on like important public figures with not a minute to lose” (IC 98) they are “moving leisurely” after their occupation, defined in terms verging on hyperbole as “[t]he weighty matters of the board”, is “over”. The ante-position of the adverb and the inversion (“Out streamed the members of the board”) associated with stressed monosyllables (or mostly) further underlines a solemnity reinforced by the enumeration of positions of
responsibility: “the Principal, the registrar, the administrative staff.” Emphasis is also laid on hierarchy through the opposition between those who belong to the highest rung of the ladder and the “staff” of lower rank who are kept waiting and are submitted to the will and favour of their superiors—both their superiors at work (“the Principal”) and their social superiors (“important guests of honour”) (99). The acceptance of such a social code, which finds a parallel in the British class system, and based on ambition and power relations is also part of the ironic narratorial stance. The academics are also described collectively, and through the hypallage “scholarly glasses”, through parts of their bodies—“nervous hands smoothed down hair […], throats were repeatedly cleared” (IC 99)—to reduce their status and their humanity, which echoes the lack of consideration for the “humanities” which are disregarded in the College, and “pushed to the dustier and more neglected corners where they languished” (108).

The garden party at Lala Ram Lal College, with tea being served under a “marquee”, among “ladies”, with people [falling] back to make way for the royal progress” (IC 103) of the Principal and his wife, bears the mark of colonialism, and mimicry is foregrounded in this parody of garden parties at Buckingham Palace. The episode of the garden party illustrates the displacement of institutions and culture by the imperial power, but alterity is inscribed in it with the historical context of tensions between the two communities, and the poor condition of Urdu as a result of Partition (101). Hybridity is hinted at in a lighter mode, but ridiculed, with the Principal’s wife’s role and her clothes: she is presented as a mock substitute for the Queen, in her “new sari of Japanese nylon with sprigs of brown and violet flowers” (98). A traditional Indian dress is revisited by new foreign influences, here represented by Japan. However, nylon, a synthetic fabric, made abroad, in Japan, marks a radical departure from natural, hand-woven material, a tradition revived by Ghandi and emblematic of the assertion of Indian identity. The nylon sari made in Japan is emblematic of a culture which, far from being enriched by the introduction of new ways, is actually diminished, tarnished, emblematic of the betrayal or loss of a cultural tradition. It mirrors the condition of Urdu in post-Partition India as presented in In Custody.

Desai draws on the Western tradition of the campus novel and incorporates Indian issues. The college, a microcosm which reflects the world outside, also reflects society in post-independence North India, notably linguistic and religious conflicts as illustrated by the tense relationship between Siddiqui, Deven and Trivedi, the head of the Hindi department and a staunch Hindu, as suggested by his name which relates him to the “vedas”.

Deven and Siddiqui, symbolically shown “in a corner, sheltering behind one of the poles [of the marquee]” (IC 105), are “going against the current” (Libert 3), like many characters who inhabit Desai’s fiction. The representatives of Urdu in the novel (along with Murad and Nur), they pine for the lost glory of Urdu. Desai does not exactly “write back” to the British colonizer, but in an interview, she implicitly refers to British responsibility in the disruptive events of Partition: “They’re my most vivid memories of childhood, and the most violent and nightmarish. The British hauled down the flag and disappeared, and practically the whole Muslim population disappeared too. Delhi has never been the same since” (Jaggi 7). In Custody inscribes the tragedy of Partition with the subsequent

6. Rosalia Baena writes that “contemporary campus novels […] portray […] the university as a microworld that mirrors the world that nurtures it.” (59)
7. See the complete analysis by M. Dvorak elsewhere in this volume.
exacerbation of communal tensions,\(^8\) in a very explicit way, for instance with Trivedi’s threat: “I won’t have Muslim toadies in my department, you’ll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas. I’ll complain to the Principal, I’ll warn the RSS, you are a traitor -” (\textit{IC} 158). The history of the decline of Urdu is presented in the novel by the prestigious poet, Nur:

How can there be Urdu poetry when 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 Hindi-wallahs tightened it. So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried. [...] Those Congress-wallahs have set up Hindi on top as our ruler. (\textit{IC} 38)

The fight against colonial repression is represented by the fate of Siddiqui’s ancestor:

an ancestor of mine [...] was thrown into disgrace at the time of the mutiny – caught by the British, he was punished and made to crawl on his knees the whole length of Chandni Chowk, and all his property seized and destroyed. He fled to Mirpore with is family [...] and so passed on the curse of living here to all succeeding generations” (\textit{IC} 148).

The fictional event recalls the fall of Wajid Ali Shah, the last ruler of Lucknow, who was sent into exile when the British annexed his state in 1856, and the overthrow of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor, who was also an Urdu poet. What is underlined in the novel is an irremediable destruction which is embodied in the characters of Deven, Siddiqui and Nur.

Nur is the embodiment of the decline of Urdu. He is portrayed as having fallen from the sublime heights of art to the grotesque depths of a “pig” (\textit{IC} 58), lying in his own “vomit”(57).\(^9\) Shown in the shade, in a gloomy room so as to signify his own decline and the extinction of Urdu, he is ironically named Nur, which means light. This could also be seen as an ironical hint at the effect of British imperialism which was supposed to bring Enlightenment to other parts of the world. Nur is utterly debunked by—among other devices—a play on the contrast between Deven’s idealization of the poet and the reality he is confronted with. Deven’s journey towards Nur is likened to a quest for God, his ascent of the stairs, in the poet’s house, towards Nur (an echo of Dante) is like an ascent to God, to the heavens of poetry and sublimity: “It was to him as if God had leaned over a cloud and called for him to come up, and angels might have been drawing him up these ancient splintered stairs to meet the deity” (34-35). As a counterpoint to this scene suffused with the sublime, Deven is depicted, in a symbolic desacralization, wiping the poet’s vomit (59) with “papers [...] which might have been inscribed with Nur’s verse” (60).

As an illustration of the destructive effects of the new configurations of Indian society, Siddiqui comes to exemplify alienation from and betrayal of the ideal world of Urdu poetry. His snobbishness is shown in stark contrast with his small size, which symbolizes the diminished status of Urdu: “Siddiqui was a small man but looked down from his height with all the contempt of a giant for a worm” (153). His decadence is made manifest by scenes of drinking and debauchery (150-151), and is metonymically imaged by his “derelict” ancestral home (145). This decadence is on the one hand a form of the disintegration of Urdu, and on the other hand an explanation of its obsolete condition (at least in the

\(8\) “With regards to the situation of Urdu in contemporary India, the language controversies of the past have had a detrimental effect on the status of Urdu wherever religious identity has come to inform the ideologically separatist correlation of Muslim=Urdu=Pakistan and Hindu=Hindi=India” (Yaqin 128).

\(9\) See the detailed analysis of the grotesque, of clowning and scatology in Dvorak, Parts Two and Three.
Anita Desai’s In Custody and the English Legacy

world of the novel). Rushdie remarks that “in the character of Siddiqui [Desai] shows us the worst side of Urdu/Muslim culture – its snobbishness, its eternal nostalgia for the lost glory of an early Empire” (Rushdie, “Anita Desai” 72-73). The portrayal of Siddiqui testifies to the truthful account of the situation by Desai who insisted: “I’m not trying to idealise or romanticise the Mughal past. There’s a lot that’s decadent, as well as beautiful. But it’s wrong to pretend it never existed” (Jaggi 6). However, the character of Siddiqui seems to embody the pernicious effects of British colonization, with the introduction of a completely different culture in India, as Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, the Urdu poet and critic, argues:

The ideas that invaded Urdu literature from the West were not only modern and novel, they were culturally alien. And they introduced disruptive elements into our literary thought. For all their philosophical soundness, these ideas introduced a period of disequilibrium. There are no signs even today that the old equilibrium will soon be restored, or that a new equilibrium is about to be achieved. (Asaduddin 45-46)

Siddiqui succumbs to the lure of money. His appropriation of Western mercantilist notions constitutes an “expropriation” (Hall 395). A literal one: he agrees to sell his house inherited from his forebears to property developers and watches on as it is being demolished, erased, to give way to new buildings (IC 218-219). It symbolizes a betrayal of the legacy of his ancestor, indirectly involved in the fight against the colonizer. This “inner expropriation of cultural identity” (Hall 395) amounts to a destruction of a cultural identity: Siddiqui’s “ancestral home” (219) being “a heap of rubble from which dust rose like a ghost” (218) signifies the death of Urdu and its complete obliteration. Throughout the novel, Deven is associated with the perception of dust, and dust is “ubiquitous” (IC 13) in Mirpore. It calls to mind T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land. While the latter evokes the devastation of the West after the fracture of the First World War, and the sterility of a fallen, Godless world, the description of Mirpore suggests the desolation engendered by the dislocating, tragic upheavals of Indian history. This dust which “rose and swirled and buried everything” (IC 15), erasing all traces of history, erases roots and a sense of continuity, and cultural identity.

As an epigraph to Clear Light of Day, Anita Desai quotes these words by Emily Dickinson: “Memory is a strange bell - /Jubilee and knell.” If Siddiqui seems to toll the death knell for Urdu, even erasing the memory of this culture, Deven takes on a different mission and decides to perpetuate the tradition by being the “custodian” (IC 225) of Nur and his poetry. Deven’s positioning could be seen as an assertion of resistance, a refusal of submission to threatening influences, Hindi, or modernity represented by technology and Japan, materialistic concerns (as shown by the recurrence of payments or demands of payment, notably from Nur) or by America and the dream of an easy life.

Nevertheless, Deven’s stance may appear as an unrealistic refuge into a romanticized realm of the heart and mind, as revealed by the unsubstantial, immaterial quality of his evocation of Nur’s poetry: “[h]e thought of Nur’s poetry being read, the sound of it softly murmur in his ears” (IC 226).11 His responsibilities in the domestic sphere are no longer mentioned at the end of the novel. By contrast, he confronts the wrath of the college authorities caused by the money wasted on his failed recordings of Nur’s interviews, because

10. This can be seen as an objective correlative, and is another allusion to T.S. Eliot.
11. On the contrary, Anita Desai said : « I did not want to romanticise the Mughal past. » (Jaggi 6)
of his commitment to Urdu which leads him to self-sacrifice: “if he was to be custodian of Nur’s genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too” (225).

Moreover, Deven’s position may be seen as a sign of stasis, and even retreat into the past. His own “chaste” Urdu (41), and his “astonishment” (171) when Nur indulges in recitations of English poets’ verse, Shelley’s and Keats, suggest an “essentialist stance”, frowning upon “the use of english because of its assumed inauthenticity in the ‘non-English’ place” (Ashcroft et al 42) here represented by the idealized world of Urdu. Just like languages—and Urdu itself, which has evolved through time and the various stages of the history of the subcontinent—“cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all,” Stuart Hall argues; it “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall 394-395). Besides, such an essentialist position diverges from the acceptance of cross-cultural encounters, whose enrichment is widely acknowledged, notably by Rushdie, and by Desai herself, who deplored the decline of Urdu at the reading she gave at the Sorbonne, Paris in March 2009. In the Indian context, choosing a Hindu protagonist (as connoted by his name Deven Sharma) as the preserver of Urdu harks back to multicultural pre-Independence Old Delhi (Jaggi 5), and could be regarded as gesturing towards a crossing of the post-Partition linguistic, religious and political divide.

Nur’s mingling of English poetry with his own verse, the “similarity” he underlines between “his ideas and images [and] those of the poets he chiefly admired” (170-171) may function as signs of the influence of English literature linked to the British empire. Yet they are also signs of a cross-cultural dialogue between the West and India, T.S. Eliot’s interest in Sanskrit and Buddhism being just one example. Marta Dvorak highlights such a point: “Anita Desai’s In Custody is exemplary of syncretic transnational writing grounded in the local or national but reaching out to international readerships” (Dvorak 12).

Colette SELLES
Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail

Works cited


