

IN CUSTODY : OPPOSING A PHALLIC CRITIC

In Custody (1984), the eighth novel of Anita Desai, has been considered by many critics as male-centred. They find that its main focus is projected upon the male characters, implying that the female characters are ciphers or nearly so. It is true that female characters like Imtiaz Begum and Sarala do not occupy as much space as Deven and Nur do in the novel. But this does not mean that they are ciphers. Actually, but for the presence of these two female characters, the construction of power relations between men and women would not have been possible in it. The power relations have emerged out of the conflictual relations of different discourses constructed by different characters. In a Foucauldian feminist perspective it is assumed that texts are determined not by one discourse, but by several different discourses which are at work in their construction. Moreover, these discourses are often in conflict with one another. On this assumption it may be argued that this novel has no centre, rather it is decentred by the conflictual relations of different discourses : discourse of nationalism vs that of journalism, Urdu vs Hindi discourse, discourse of new housewife vs discourse of traditional housewife and the discourse of female artist vs. that of the male critic. Of these conflicts, the dominant one is the conflict between the discourse of female artist and that of the male critic.

A critic like Usha Bande has traced out Deven's awareness of the existential problem of man (1988 : 166). Dr. Kunj Bala has brought out 'the see-saw play between realism and fantasy' (1989 : 92). Again, P. Bhatnagar has dwelt upon 'Deven's pursuit of art' (Bhatnagar in R.K. Dhawan (ed.) Set I vol. IV, 1991 : 53). All these readings are silent upon the woman question. However, my reading attempts at exploring a female artist's status in the domain of patriarchal art and a Hindu housewife's status in Hindu patriarchal family.

The novel has eleven chapters. While we go through them, we come across a brief description of Mirpore which provides us with an image of post-independence India, as Chandrapore in Forster's *A Passage to India* gives us a picture of colonial India in

miniature. In Mirpore dwell people of different religious communities : Hindu, Muslim and Christian. The locations of mosque and the temples show the separate habitations of the two communities; otherwise they live in peace and harmony. The dilapidated historical mosque made of marble stones needs to be repaired, but the local Muslims are not in a position to do it. So poor they are in post-independence India. On the other hand, the temples of the pre-historical times which have often been wrecked, rebuilt and replaced without distorting their essential forms display the economic condition of the local Hindus. Both these communities try to maintain communal harmony by keeping the pigs out of the mosque area and by never slaughtering any cow near a temple. It is only during Mohurram and Holi that communal tensions mount up and communal riots break out from time to time partly because of the provoking news published by the newspapers. What is evident from the incident is that the religious tolerance and communal harmony which the nationalist discourse guarantees get jolted from time to time by the anti-secular discourses in the newspapers.

In *A Passage to India*, Aziz asked the colonizers to go : 'clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say' – so that India could become a nation of brothers :

India shall be a nation. No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one! Hurrah! Hurrah for India! (317)

India is now an independent nation, yet, as the novelist observes, Aziz's vision remains unfulfilled. The same communal divisions, tensions and riots persist in it. The unguarded releases in newspapers are held responsible for undermining the secular character of the nationalist discourse. But here it is noticeable that in drawing the conflict between the discourses in the newspapers and the nationalist discourse on secularism the novelist shows her critical attitude towards both the discourses. Not only that, in resurrecting the poor economic condition of the Muslims in post-independence India she shows sympathy towards them and at the same time is critical of the nationalist economic policy towards the minority community. Here her position is like that of a Third-world feminist who shows concern not only about the women's problem but also about the problem of the marginalized people in the country.

Therefore, we again find the novelist draw a conflict between the discourses on Urdu and the discourses on Hindi so that she can speak for the marginalized Urdu language in post-independence India. Here it is pertinent to note the observation of Indra Nath Chaudhuri about Indian national language policy :

While formulating the language policy of the Congress, Nehru reiterated that the common language should be Hindustani ... In the name of Hindustani which was being developed as the common language of India before 1947, it was obvious that Hindi and Urdu would have grown nearer to each other. But after independence because of Urdu which became official language of Pakistan, Hindi was adopted as National language on the basis of certain political arguments that were floated during that time in India. Nehru could not escape those arguments (1992 : 208).

What Indra Nath observes is that Hindi occupied a dominant position because of its association with the dominant Hindus and Urdu lost much of its position for being identified as the language of a Muslim country. Anita Desai is not unaware of the communalization of the national language policy and the Hindiwallas' deep hatred towards the Urdu loving people which she brings out through the subjectivity of Trivedi, Head, Department of Hindi, Lala Ramlal College :

I won't have Muslim toadies in my department, you'll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language. I'll warn the RSS... you are a traitor (145).

By 'you' Trivedi refers to the Urdu loving people like Deven Sharma, a temporary lecturer of his department.

Deven Sharma had been more a poet than a professor before marriage. But after marriage, although he has expended the maximum of his energy to his job, yet he has not lost his interest in Urdu poetry because it is his inherited quality from his father. The love for Urdu which was in dormant state gets activated as his school chum Murad appears unexpectedly with the proposals for him to interview Nur Shahjehanibadi, the greatest living Urdu poet of that time and write an article for the special number of urdu journal 'Aaawz' he would bring out on the poet. Deven, 'still a two-cigarette man' (11), can easily

be coaxed into believing that the interview would change his fortune and that his article would be a step towards the revival of the glorious past of Urdu language and literature. Then as a self-styled patron of Urdu language, he valorises Urdu by relegating Hindi to the position of 'vegetarian monster' and 'rusticity' (15). Murad's discourse – that Urdu which had been the language of the court in the days of royalty has now been languishing due to the lack of its patron—makes an impact upon Deven's subjectivity. His immediate recitation from Nur's poetry bears testimony to the fact :

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

Its small joys the flowers of funeral wreaths (26).

Here Deven's obedience to Urdu may be construed as Anita Desai's love for Urdu language and literature.

However, Deven meets Nur, the urdu poet. But what he finds is that Nur's life is messy, distorted and disintegrated. This makes him wonder how 'out of all this hubbub, the poet drew the threads and wove his poetry or philosophy' (52). In the second meeting Deven finds Nur charged with oppositional consciousness with which he debunks the Hindiwallas' politics of language and lashes against the Congresswallas who are believed to have thwarted the development of Urdu by making it the language of the few Urdu loving students and teachers in the universities. Thereafter Nur subverts Hindi literature by an 'act of mimicry' of Hindi verses of Sri Gobind :

Sun, moon, stars, sky,

planets, clouds, comets, I,

God made them all as he made me

A star too I must be (56).

However, Nur's contiguity causes a change in Deven who no longer hesitates to invite Nur to attack Hindiwallas not only by the 'act of mimicry', but also by articulation of the past glory of Urdu through an Urdu journal. Here it is relevant to note that Deven has become not only the agent of Urdu but also subjected to Nur.

In the third meeting in Nur's house, Deven takes note of the resistance to his guru's art by a female artist. He observes that in his guru's house, his guru Nur has been pushed to the margin by the female artist, occupying the centre-stage in her birthday ceremony. Here it is interesting to note that whatever may be the gender of an artist, the artist should be recognised as an artist. But the moment Deven finds the artist a female, his phallic mind detects a coquette in her flashing smiles at her audience. As a phallic critic, he denies her artistic quality on the basis of patriarchal poetics and consider Imtiaz Begum to be a 'female mafia or a prostitute'. Thus denying Imtiaz's creativity he elevates his guru Nur to the height of a great poet.

Like Deven, Nur also betrays his phallocentricity by accusing her of having betrayed him. He confides to Deven that when she first came to his house, she was shy of showing herself and her verse to anybody else except him. But gradually 'she wanted my house, my audience, my friends' (87). Now she has robbed him of all these things. But his accusation against her that arises out of his inferiority complex may be construed as the male ego's refusal to accept the supremacy of the female artist. However, Imtiaz Begum is no compliant woman to stomach her husband's filthy terms against her, she silences him with a counter accusation :

You could not bear the sight of someone else regaling with poetry – the same poetry you used to mouth (89).

Here it is pertinent to note that in allowing Imtiaz Begum to raise her voice against the oppressive phallic power, Anita Desai shifts her position. Instead of showing her sympathy towards the marginalized poet like Nur, now she expresses her feeling of sisterhood towards a marginalized female artist.

Nevertheless, Anita Desai is not unaware of the differences between women. Sufia Begum's quarrel with Imtiaz Begum is a case in point. While Imtiaz Begum is found to be gearing up her struggle against gender discrimination, Sufia Begum is trying to spoil that struggle by quarreling with her and making an intrigue with Deven against her. Sufia's quarrel may be for sharing maximum time with her husband, Nur. But she should have

understood that in Muslim patriarchy a man can keep four wives at a time on condition that he must give equal treatment to all of them. But Nur has violated that norm by giving more attention to Imtiaz for the enjoyment of her beauty and intellectual company. Hence she should have quarrelled with Nur who is applying double-standard on them. But instead of doing that, she quarrels with Imtiaz Begum who has already geared up her struggle for equality. Here one may ask why does a woman quarrel with another woman? According to Kamla Bhasin, 'this generally happens when the women considered men the sun and themselves its satellites, without the light of their own. The women therefore constantly compete with each other to have a bigger share of the sun light because without the light there is no life' (1993 : 16). It is the women like Sufia who think so.

Again, in addition to that quarrel, Sufia Begum cuts Imtiaz Begum down to size by intriguing with Deven. While Imtiaz does not permit Deven to record Nur's voice and his poetry in their house, Sufia removes all of Deven's anxieties by providing him with a secret room for recording, though on payment. Here it is interesting to note that as slavery would not have lasted for so long without the tacit co-operation of the slaves, so patriarchal hegemony could not continue without the women's willing consent to it. What is the irony of feminism is that while Imtiaz is taking a position of resistance to phallic power, Sufia willingly surrenders to it.

Deven has already been granted a fund for the completion of the recording session. But he misuses the fund and betrays his foolishness : firstly, in purchasing a second hand tape-recorder; secondly, in depending on an inexperienced technician and thirdly, in sifting art from life. Moreover, he cannot set the programme in proper order, it is extended from one week to three weeks. Owing to the lack of co-ordination the recording session ends in a fiasco. Nur, with his noisy, loudish companions, rambles a lot about biryani and rum. At times in simple prosaic terms he narrates the story of his youth, of his education, of his travels, of his loves or quarrels. Chiku, the technician, records all the irrelevant portions of Nur's discourses and is too late to record his poetry. Actually, the recording session proves that Nur is now devoid of coherence and creativity and that Deven is ineffectual, limited and impractical. Nur is a failure as an artist; Deven as a recorder. In proving them so in

opposition to Imtiaz Begum who has already been shown as a success on the stage, the novelist seems to subvert the patriarchal binary thought that equates male always with victory and female with defeat.

After returning home, financially crippled Deven finds that he is no longer irritated by shabbiness of his wife's limp, or hunched, twisted posture, by her untidy hair or sudden expression. It seems to him that it is 'all part of his own humiliation' (193). However, he considers touching her, putting an arm around her, but his sense of male power and position over her prevents him from doing that. He stops that move with the thinking :

It would permanently undermine his position and power over her (194).

Anyway, an unopened letter on the table draws his attention. The letter is from no less a person than Imtiaz Begum, the female artist. The letter may be here treated as a feminist discourse on the female art of poetry. In it the female artist, in a confessional mood, informs Deven that nothing of the recording session was unknown to her. Her husband Nur could not but inform her of it. She has also accused him of having insulted her intelligence by considering the co-wife more wise and capable. Thereafter she has wondered whether, like the other people, he still considers her a prostitute. She has also added if he, like them, considers her so, it would be an act of insult not only to her but also to his revered poet because his revered poet was interested in her mind, talk and poetry. After the argument, she has requested Deven to judge her poetry. She has perhaps known that validity and existence of a work of art is contingent upon the judgement of the critics. Foucault also thinks so :

Commentary which is the first of circulatory mechanisms in discursive structures keeps certain discourses in existence. Those discourses which are commented upon by others are the discourses which we consider to have validity and worth. (Quoted in Sara Mills, 1997 : 67).

But it is noticeable that Imtiaz Begum has wanted Deven to judge her work not in accordance with the criteria of the patriarchal poetics, but judge it as a woman's work. As she puts it in her discourse :

It is therefore necessary that I prove my gifts and abilities to you and to other scholars and devotees of art of poetry. It is for this reason that I am enclosing my latest poems for you to read and study and judge if you are strong enough to face them and admit to their merit, or if they fill you with fear and insecurity because they threaten you with danger – danger that your superiority to women may become questionable (196).

In this part of the discourse she has called into question the superiority of male artists. Not only that, she has also exposed the phallogentricity of the critics like Deven by producing an alternative knowledge about the victimization of the female artists like Imtiaz Begum in the following part of the discourse :

While I was singing my verse, you left the mehfil, was it not because you feared I might eclipse the verse of Nur Sahib and other male poets whom you revere? Was it not intolerable to you that a woman should match their gifts and even outstrip them? Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement while I, because I was born female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected? Is it not you who have made me play the role of the loose woman in gaudy garments by refusing to take my work seriously and giving just that much regard that you would extend to even a failure in arts as long as the artists was male (Ibid).

Thus in exposing the gender discrimination even in the domain of art and taking the subject position, Imtiaz Begum again requests Deven to include her work into his custody.

But commentary, according to Foucault, 'is not an entirely selfless act' (cited in Sara Mills 1997 : 68). Deven's refusal to include her work into his custody serves certain purposes. He saves himself from being called 'sissy' and maintains the positions of the male writers. Not only that, he also establishes his own power and position as a 'phallic

critic'. This being so, he shatters her work by tearing it into pieces and scatters them over the floor of his house in front of his wife Sarala, who, seeing that, comments :

You are dropping rubbish all over the floor I have just swept (197).

The torn pieces of the paper containing her poems may symbolically be conceived of as the Sibyl's leaves : "the leaves", according to Gilbert and Gubar, 'haunt us with the possibility that if we can piece together their fragments, the parts will form a whole that tells the story of the career of a single woman artist ... a woman whom patriarchal poetics dismembered" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979 : 101). Adapting Gilbert and Gubar it may be said that the phallic critic's exclusionary practice in the domain of art can be ideologically combated in two ways. There are female critics like Sarala who unconsciously dismiss the dismembered female artist's work as 'rubbish'. But the critics who are conscious of gender discrimination may try to piece together her writings to form a complete story of her career. Besides, they may remember the dismembered female artist by reconstituting a discourse of her fragmented art of poetry. Anita Desai here gives voice to the female artist like Imtiaz by resurrecting her subjugated knowledge as to how her creativity was denied by a male critic and thereby asserts that creativity is not the monopoly of man, the female artists like Imtiaz can stride in the domain of art if recognised.

Sarala's subjectivity is in process. At the end of the novel she becomes a compliant woman, though in the beginning she was not such a woman. She was stony sulky and furious. One may ask what made her stony sulky and furious. The answer is not far to seek. Sarala was not Deven's choice, she was actually chosen by Deven's mother and her aunt who found her suitable in every way : 'plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic' (67). But what they had not suspected was that 'Sarala, as a girl and as a new bride, had aspirations too' (Ibid). The aspirations were the effect of the discourses of the commercial companies and media which appropriated the discourses on new woman or new housewife in order to augment the sales of the companies' products like refrigerators, television, phone, mixers etc. 'Sarala dreamt the magazine dream of marriage : herself stepping out of a car with plastic shopping bag full of groceries and filling them into gleaming refrigerator, then rushing to the telephone placed on a lace doily upon a three-legged table and excitedly

ringing up her friends to invite them to see a picture show with her and her husband who was beaming at her from behind a flowered curtain' (68).

But by marrying into the academic profession and moving to a small town outside the capital, none of her magazine dreams was materialized. She had to take the role of a tired and shabby-looking housewife. She was naturally embittered. The novelist as a woman cannot but express sympathy towards another woman's predicament with a comment :

At least Deven has poetry; she had nothing and there was an added accusation and bitterness in his look (Ibid).

However, Deven was enraged by her tacit accusations that added to the load of his back. He felt like a 'trapped animal' (131); 'marriage, family and job had placed him in the cage' (Ibid). To get relief, 'he would hurl away dishes, bawl uncontrollably' (68). In drawing such a picture of the patriarchal family in the capitalist society, the novelist seems to have produced a truth that the man in it is always in advantageous position because even the poor and failure man like Deven has been privileged to dominate his wife by displaying the male rage of his frustrated ego in other way.

Sarala could not become the new housewife because of the uneven distribution system of capitalism. The companies' discourses made an effect on her subjectivity, but the new housewife in her became compelled to alter her position with that of tired, shabby-looking housewife because of her husband's poor income. For that she did not leave her husband, rather like a traditional Hindu housewife, she would worship gods and goddesses for the welfare of her husband and her family. Yet the consciousness of a new woman sometimes propels her to raise a certain structural problem of the patriarchal culture :

It was only men who could play at being dead while still alive, such idleness was luxury in her opinion. Now if she were to start playing such tricks, where would they all be? Who would take Manu to school and cook lunch for them (128-29).

Deven would not have known how to answer her. Sarala's problem is not her individual problem. Through Sarala the novelist refers to a structural problem of the patriarchal society. Man, after his defeat, or his work, can take rest in the inner domain of home, but the woman who has no other independent profession and has nowhere to go has to bear the burnt of domestic life. Sarala knows if she stops cooking, mothering and cleaning, the entire system would collapse. Yet she can not do so, because as a Hindu housewife she realises that she can enjoy in the least a sort of power and position in the inner space of home. For this status she returns to her own home. The novelist welcomes her return with a comment :

She was actually quite pleased to be back in her own domain, to assume all its responsibilities, her indispensable presence in it; in her parents' home she has missed the sense of her own capability and position (194).

Thus in making Sarala selectively appropriate the institution like family towards the maintenance of her status as a housewife, Anita Desai takes the Third-world feminist position and colludes with nationlist discourse that locates woman in the inner sanctum of home, though not without reservation about it.