Language Politics and Polarizations in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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Abstract

Government language policies, socio-economic contexts, and commercial interests often create a linguistic hierarchy among languages. The article discusses the communalization of Hindi and Urdu with reference to Partition that not just drew physical borders but created linguistic-cultural between languages. The literary and social ramifications of the division between languages is deliberated upon with reference to Anita Desai's *In Custody*. While the memory of separation and partition is repeatedly evoked in the novel to discuss the division of nations and linguistic traditions, the article suggests one needs to move beyond nostalgic remembrance to find new intersections of connections and negotiations between languages.

Keywords: Linguistic hierarchy, hegemony, communalization of languages, Anita Desai, linguistic-cultural mixing

Politicization of Languages

Language has multiple roles including communication of meaning, conveyor of culture, construction of social identity and conduct of business. When multiple languages interact and intersect in the social-political sphere, often a contentious field is drawn where languages compete for recognition and supremacy. Government language policies, socio-economic contexts and commercial interests often create a linguistic hierarchy among languages. This article examines linguistic anxieties with reference to Anita Desai's *In Custody*, a novel that presents the politicized issue of languages in India. Short-listed for the Booker Prize

in 1984, the novel calls attention to communalization of languages and disintegration of Urdu in post-Partition India.

Desai's *In Custody* is based in Delhi of the 1970s and chronicles the decline of the Urdu language and literature, and blames the government policies for the same. The novel presents linguistic chauvinism with reference to Urdu and Hindi, and documents the waning prestige of Urdu through the perspective of Hindi lecturer, Deven. The protagonist, Deven is caught in a conundrum, Urdu fuels his creative imagination but does not offer economic sustenance, and he is compelled to teach Hindi to sustain his corporeal needs, "I am-only a teacher...and must teach to support my family" (Desai, 2007, p. 40). The text narrates Deven's quixotic attempts to record the verses of Nur Shahjehanabadi, arguably India's greatest contemporary Urdu poet. Nur repeatedly expresses his anguish that Urdu, the language that enjoyed royal patronage of the Mughal court is threatened with extinction, and is livid that instead Hindi is accorded a privileged position in post-independence India.

While Partition hastened the decline of Urdu in India, the diminished role of the language in the social fabric can be traced further back to the 1857 revolt where the fall of the Mughal empire, the expulsion of Muslims from Delhi, and the destruction of libraries in the city weakened its linguistic-cultural dominion. Aijaz Ahmad tracing the history of Urdu language and literature, describes three aspects for the breakup of the Urdu writing community after Partition. First was the migration of Muslim Urdu speakers to Pakistan; second was communalization of languages whereby Urdu was considered a Muslim language; and third, the abandonment of Hindustani in favour of Hindi as the official language. Ahmad considers the non-recognition of Hindustani as lingua franca as a major loss since it served as a "living link between Urdu and Hindi" (p. 202).

Urdu came to prominence around the middle of the eighteenth century, with ousting of Persian from the courts by the British and its replacement with English. During the freedom movement, Hindustani was suggested as a neutral solution to the thorny Hindi-Urdu controversy, but the stumbling block was choice of script. Alok Rai in "The Persistence of Hindustani" (2005) discusses the lingering ghost of Hindustani that haunts the language debate in India where it is suggested as a "pacific compromise" (p. 135). Hindustani was the language of popular imagination, however the constitution assembly

debates could not accede to use of Hindustani as an official language, its hybrid linguistic domain became its disadvantage, moreover the problem of script could not be solved. Granville Austin sums up the debate, "Partition killed Hindustani" (Cited in Rai, 2005, p. 142). With Urdu adopted as the national language of Pakistan, issues of territorial, cultural and nationalist identities get interlinked with the language. The Government of India adopted Hindi (along with English) as the official language, relegating Urdu, a language that had enjoyed patronage of kings and courts to a devalued position in the language hierarchy. It is important to remind oneself that Urdu was born on Indian soil; one school of thought believes that the only difference between Hindi and Urdu is of script, with the former written in Devanagri and latter in Persian script. Since the case for bridge language Hindustani (with the unresolved problem of script) as lingua franca fell apart, Partition of the country created an insurmountable divide among the languages. Hindu and Urdu became associated not just with religious identity, but with geo-political boundaries and accompanying ideas of nationalism.

In Custody portrays these linguistic tensions where the Urdu world is resentful of the imposed hegemony of Hindi, and the Hindi sphere does not tolerate intrusions of Urdu lovers. Deven is criticized at college for transgression, for loving the "Other", Urdu, a language associated with the Muslims. When he applies for leave to interview Nur, the head of the Hindi department, Trivedi, humiliates and threatens him, "I'll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu department. I won't have Muslim toadies in my Department" (Desai, p. 163). Desai deliberates upon the post-partition linguistic and cultural divide, and recalls her growing up years in Delhi where the sound of Urdu had a pervasive presence. In an interview with Costa (2001), Desai discusses the declining number of Urdu speakers in Delhi,

> I was always surrounded by the sound of Urdu poetry, which is mostly recited... But although there is such a reverence for Urdu poetry, the fact that most Muslims left India to go to Pakistan meant that most schools and universities of Urdu were closed. So that it's a language I don't think is going to survive in India (p. 5).

Desai rightly points out that to keep a language alive, to create a class of readers and writers of literature in that language, institutional support is important. Urdu has been deinstitutionalized in contemporary India with few schools and colleges offering it as a language of formal study.

Urdu is alienated in educational institutions; the Urdu department in Lala Ram Lal College, is a compromise arrangement as the nawab who fled from Delhi to Mirpore gave large donations to the institution. The one-man department has few student takers, and the small frame of lecturer, Siddiqui is symptomatic of the marginal status of Urdu.

Decline of Urdu in Post-Independent India

Yaqin (2004) in "The Communalization and Disintegration of Urdu in Anita Desai's *In Custody*" deliberates that Desai analyses "Urdu as the cultural object of a lived experience in post-Partition India" (p. 122). The "memory of separation and partition" (p. 122) is repeatedly evoked to discuss the divisions of nations and linguistic traditions. With the weakened status of Urdu in present, a sense of nostalgia for the past glory of Urdu hangs heavy over the text.

The diminished status of Urdu speakers is reflected in the liminal spaces occupied by them. Nur's house in the midst of a crowded bazaar, Siddiqui's crumbling haveli and Murad's cramped office space are mirror images reflecting neglect and ruin. Deven has to negotiate the nightmarish maze of a busy commercial market to reach Nur's house. Nur is depicted in a dark, gloomy room that signifies his "own decline and the extinction of Urdu, he is ironically named Nur, which means light" (Selles, 2009, p. 120). He seems to be living in exile in a world where the domineering Hindi has overpowered the literary scene. While Hindi writers are celebrated and venerated, Urdu texts are often ignored with respect to literary awards. Urdu, the language of court, the vehicle of art and literature "now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No palace for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, no emperors and Nawabs to act as its patrons" (Desai, p. 8). Nur points at himself, "How can there be Urdu poetry when there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished...So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried" (p. 38).

Every evening, "louts, those lafangas of the bazaar world" (Desai, p. 49) gather at Nur's house, dividing themselves into India/Pakistan, Hindustani/Persian camps, they recreate language debates in an endlessly repetitive cycle. The two divergent positions link language with question of identity-construction but these men are not opinion or policy makers, they are merely drunk actors playing roles on cue. This

scene is played at twilight, symbolic of Nur who is past his prime, his best days as a poet are over and he does not have the roar in his verses to reclaim the lost status of Urdu. Nur's bodily ailments too reflect the sickened state of Urdu, his fall from sublime heights as a poet to hitting the nadir when lying in his vomit are powerful images that depict the collapse of the Urdu literary scene.

The expectations of reviving Urdu centre around the poet, Nur, and the lecturer, Siddiqui but both prove ineffectual. Siddiqui represents a dying culture, and lives in a deteriorating haveli which re-emphasizes the decay of Urdu and the peripheral position of its speakers. He makes desperate attempts to cling to grandeur and glory by arranging food, drinks and entertainment when Deven visits him. The twilight scene of the two men drinking among ruins mirrors the decadence of Nur's house and reminds one of 'Shatraj ke khiladi' where debauchery makes one oblivious to the overpowering forces outside. Rushdie in "Introduction" to *In Custody* remarks,

> Urdu may be dying, and her [Desai] novel may be in part be a lament for that death, but nevertheless in the character of Siddiqui she [Desai] shows us the worst side of Urdu/Muslim culture—its snobbishness, its eternal nostalgia for the lost glory of an early Empire (Rushdie, 2007, p. xi).

Siddiqui succumbs to the lure of money, and sells the haveli he has inherited and watches it being demolished. Hall terms this "inner expropriation of cultural identity" (Cited in Selles, 2009, p. 121); the haveli symbolizes the historical-cultural lineage and it being razed to the ground marks the obliteration of the ethos associated with the class of aristocratic Muslims. On the part of Siddiqui, it is a willing relinquishment of cultural memory and linguistic tradition. It reinforces the notion that Siddiqui's class can no longer be the custodians of Urdu as they have minimal power or inclination to make a difference at the national level. This act of his raises questions if Siddiqui is adaptable to the new modern world or is he merely a weak and self-indulgent character who cannot resist the temptation of materialism, his decision could be indicative of his acceptance that the nostalgic past needs to make way for new ways of life.

While the Muslim Urdu speakers, Siddiqui and Nur, prove unsuccessful to revive Urdu language and literature, Devan is allotted the role of

custodian of Nur's verse/Urdu literature. It appears to be a nostalgic harking back to the multicultural pre-Partition Delhi and could be regarded as a gesturing towards crossing the linguistic divides, and hope for restoring of the composite culture of languages, cultures and literary traditions. Given the religious- linguistic divide of languages, it is significant that Deven, the Hindu character, is entrusted with preserving the "Other", Urdu, a language that is almost in an endangered situation. But despite best efforts, the result is a disaster as the tapes with Nur's verses are of poor quality.

The narrative obliquely critiques Deven's limitations as a custodian, especially his scepticism about using tools of modernity (tape recorder) for archiving works of writers and viewing the world of Urdu literature with a misogynistic eye that excludes female voices. Desai in an interview said that she conceptualized the novel about the Urdu literary world to be without women, "There would have to be women in the margins, but I did not want any of them to take part in this male world, because in real life they did not, or to a very limited extent did" (Guignery & Tadié, 2009, p. 374). Female characters, however, seem to escape the author's custody, and force themselves on the narrative either through the sullen silence of Deven's wife, Sarla or cacophony of Nur's wife, Imtiaz Begum. In an interview with Costa, Desai acknowledges her inability to ignore women's voices, she could hear them screaming in the background, banging on the doors. Imtiaz Begum's shrillness makes her an unpleasant and unlikeable character and Desai offers an explanation,

> Why am I making them so nasty? And I realized that if women are kept locked up in the conditions that they are in, that is how they would be. They would be extremely nasty and shrill and make sure that they were heard somehow, even if just by making a great deal of noise with pots and pans (Guigner & Tadié, 2009, p. 374).

The gaze of the male misogynistic protagonist finds this piercing and high-pitched female voice threatening, Imtiaz's voice can be viewed as the repressed voice of common women, but specifically of women artists. Imtiaz refuses to be located at margins of the male literary world and text, she subverts gender spaces and roles by occupying centre stage at the poetry recitation. She infiltrates the exclusive male domain of Urdu poetry and recites verses about freedom. However, Deven dismisses it as stolen craft and parodied imagery that she has slyly learnt from Nur, disparaging her creativity as mimicry.

Despite Deven's dismissive disregard of Imtiaz's creativity, Imtiaz sends her poems to him along with a letter that is like a feminist manifesto for women's right of artistic production. She dares him to read her work,

> I am enclosing my latest poems for you to read and study and judge if they do not have some merit of their own. Let me see 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 (Desai, 2007, p. 224).

Deven throws away her poems without reading, and it makes one question if revival of Urdu language and culture is possible if it is not ready to make space for new voices. Is it plausible to keep the Urdu literary world an exclusively male domain where women's creative voices are silenced. Deven's act problematizes bestowing the responsibility of custodian on him.

Linguistic-Cultural Mixing and Intersections

Interestingly the linguistic struggle between Hindi and Urdu is presented and mediated through English language in *In Custody*. Apart from Desai's proficiency in English that makes it the natural choice for writing, introducing the third language in the debate raises significant questions that do not have simple answers: Is English chosen as a medium because it offers a "neutral" stance in this wrestle for linguistic dominance? Or is the neutrality of English born out of a self-assured position of superiority? If Hindi-Urdu discussion has brough forth the associated religious-cultural identities, English alludes to the legacy of the colonizer, and the changes and disruptions it has caused. English as the medium of narrative weaves in intertextuality and indicates that whether one discusses the struggle between Indian languages or suggest a composite literary-cultural heritage, the influence of English literature cannot be ignored. Not just Desai's epigraph from Wordsworth, but Nur's recitation of Shelley and Keats imply a dialogue between different linguistic traditions. Marta Dvorak (2009) in "The Politics of Language and the Poetics of Creolization in Anita Desai's *In Custody*" uses Bhabha's concept of interstices to suggest that the novel can be considered an example "of ever-shifting syncretist hybridity resulting from cross-fertilization or cultural mixing" (p. 100).

However, it seems that the world seen from the perspective of the custodian, Deven is not accommodative towards mixing. Instead, he is caught in nostalgic remembrance of Urdu, and for Nur this nostalgia is rooted in cultural memory of pre-Partition India. Urdu is presented as a tradition to be remembered, and the novel reads like a farwell note, but is unable to offer ways for continuation of legacy. Yaqin argues that Desai's novel does not offer variants of Urdu in contrast to novelist Intizar Husain's view who feels that the cultural tradition lies in shifting locations, and that language is by nature hybrid and adaptable (p. 138). As opposed to the narrow perspective of the custodian, Deven the novel searches a way forward for continuation of linguistic-cultural traditions. Perhaps the Forsterian idea of "only connect" suggests a way- to connect beyond purist ideas of language, to connect without distinctions of low and high art, to connect by including young voices, to connect by using technology and social media, and to connect at sites and intersections of linguistic-cultural mixing.

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