

## IN CUSTODY; ANITA DESAI (Semester 2)

### Character Analysis

- **DEVEN**
- Deven Sharma is the main character of this novel. He is introduced as a character who seems to have known more disappointments in his life than the sense of fulfillment. He is far from being a passionate Hindi professor and he reminds readers of the character of Krishna, from R.K Narayan's *The English Teacher*. Deven is a 'two-cigarette' man, that is a victim of imposed limits. He is in a forced-marital relationship with his wife, Sarla, practicing a profession he is not passionate about and living in a garbage-filled and restricted area, Mirpore.
- Urdu language is what makes Deven feel alive. He is a dedicated and die-heart passionate of Urdu poetry. His strong love for Urdu poetry and mostly Nur, the Urdu poet even makes him violate certain rules in his life. Urdu poetry makes him forget his family and professional duties when he decides to travel to Old Delhi, more specifically, Chandni Chowk, to meet his idol, Nur. He indeed becomes "in custody" of Nur and his wives and most importantly his friend, Murad.
- Deven's meetings with Nur are highly symbolical as they reflect his ultimate love and passion for Urdu poetry. He describes Nur as a divine figure and even among all the cacophonies at Nur's place, Deven's worship of Urdu poetry remains unchanged. He is a determined character and does not want to give up despite the numerous obstacles.
- Deven's character is made appealing by the fact that despite being the protagonist of this novel, he bears many characteristics of an antagonist (villainous character). He is portrayed mostly as someone who is rather self-focused. His marriage had rendered him slaved to his family. He has been working as a Hindi Lecturer at Lala Ram Lal College mostly to sustain his family. However, Murad's proposal to interview Nur triggered a major shift in him. His focus changes from his family to Nur. He is certainly a failure as a husband, a father and a Hindi lecturer.
- **Sarla**
- Sarla is introduced as being "*plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic*". As a girl and a new bride, she had dreamed of having a home filled with a phone, a frigidaire and all luxuries but she ended in a small town

with an equally disappointed husband. She is an unhappy wife as she feels abandoned by a husband who seems to be more interested in poetry than his family life. Her control over Deven is shown by her power of turning Deven into a “*two cigarette*” man.

- **Nur**

- Nur’s character is highly symbolical as he stands for the father and protector of Urdu poetry. His struggle to keep Urdu poetry alive is quite evident to readers. However, being such a dignified and talented poet, he seems to be a misfit in the noisy, polluted and gutter-like Chandni Chowk. Instead of being appreciated and venerated for being such a great poet, Nur’s life is filled with “vultures”, “lafangas” and profit-oriented people namely Imtiaz Begum, his second wife.
- What makes Nur’s character appealing lies more on the impacts he has on the “invisible” man, namely Deven. The interview stimulates in Deven the willingness to leave the “no-man’s” world, Mirpore, to move to the bustling Chandni Chowk. Nur, hereby, acts as the motivating factor in Deven’s life, having the power in rekindling his desire to do something for his own happiness.
- Nur is also a victim of old age and gluttony. His excessive consumption of food and alcoholic drinks is yet another issue for Deven’s interview.
- Does Desai make Nur an unlikeable character? Nur is indeed an unsympathetic character as in no ways does he show any interest in the interview. He seems untouched by the effort brought in by Deven to make the interview possible. He is more concerned about entertaining the young fools around him, food or even into finding a third wife. Readers might even question on who is the real custodian of Urdu poetry- Deven or Nur.

- **Murad**

- Murad is introduced as a self-centred and benefit-oriented character. He takes advantage of the innocence and passion of Deven to reach Nur. He is a manipulative character who uses Deven for his own benefits. He is often described as a chameleon character as he changes strategies constantly. He is an opportunist who persistently looks for his own profits. His wealthy family and the fact that he is from a major city like Delhi make Murad feels more superior than Deven. He is always reminding Deven of his weaknesses and failures making the latter feel inferior.

- **Imtiaz Begum**

- Typical of Anita Desai, she has given birth to two strong female characters in this novel, namely Sarla and Imtiaz Begum. Though younger than Nur, she seems to be controlling what Nur can talk about and what he can do. She is depicted as an enraged wife:

*“She does not like me to recite any more...”*

- What shows her strength more is that she has been able to make Nur give up something which is most precious to him: Urdu poetry. She is aware of every word spoken to Nur, making the latter feel like a prisoner in his own house. She has spies all over the house, stealing thus Nur’s freedom of speech and movement. She stands as an obstacle to Nur’s emancipation as a poet and most importantly a hurdle to Deven’s interview.

- **The Old Lady**

- The old lady, or more precisely, the first wife of Nur, is of key importance in Deven’s mission to interview Nur. Her old age and the fact that she bore only daughters make her less impactful than Imtiaz Begum and yet she seems to know Nur well and this can be a huge advantage for Deven. However, she poses yet another hindrance for Deven’s interview. She agrees to plan the meeting with Nur but in return she is expecting money from Deven, showing thus her money-mindedness.

- **Siddiqui Sahib**

- Siddiqui Sahib is the head of the Urdu department of Lala Ram Lal College. He is the representative of the nawabs who chose to stay back in India after partition. He compares Urdu to cashew nuts, rare and mostly for export. Siddiqui Sahib is one of the key figures helping Deven towards his démarche. He acts more as a catalyst as he is the one to arrange money to buy the tape recorder He is the one who speaks to Mr Rai for the money. He brings a small tint of hope to the hopeless Deven.

- **Themes**

- **Language Struggle**

- The novel is set during the post-partition period and the massive movement of Muslims towards Pakistan is the main reason for the gradual lack of interest in Urdu language. The small and quasi non-existent Urdu Department in Deven’s college clearly mirrors the linguistic doom of the Urdu language.

Siddiqui, the Head of Department of Urdu language, is described as being idle and unenthusiastic. He points out how Muslims are deserting India to move elsewhere and that Urdu language is gradually becoming as rare as “cashew nuts”.

- The linguistic struggle is more evident within Nur’s household. Urdu poetry used to be cherished and appreciated but at Nur’s place, Urdu poetry is being used by Imtiaz Begum to entertain the drunkards and charlatans.

- **Theme of Existentialism**

- Deven’s purpose of existing is highly questioned all throughout the novel. His profession as a Hindi Lecturer or even his marital life are not satisfying enough for him. His life in Mirpore seems to have been shaped for him by Sarla, his wife and his poor family background. He is a failed Hindu Lecturer, an unloved husband and father. Interviewing Nur has somehow given him a reason to be. If he succeeds in interviewing Nur, it will not only awaken a feeling of accomplishment but also give a meaning to his life.

- **Theme of Friendship**

- Friendship has been both a boon and a curse to Deven. Murad, despite his flaws, turns out to be a blessing for Deven. His proposal to interview Nur, turns Deven’s meaningless life into an eventful one.
- The friendship between Deven and Raj, on the other hand, seems more genuine and is a selfless one. Though far, Raj is able to help Deven by providing him shelter in Darya Ganj.

- **Obstacles faced by Deven**

- One main hurdle in Deven’s life is his marital relationship with Sarla. Sarla seems to be having a controlling hand on Deven’s life. She seems to be restricting him from following his dreams. She perpetually reminds him that dreams and passion cannot feed a family. As a matter of fact, both Deven and Sarla are trapped in an unhappy marriage. They are both victims of an arranged marriage.

It is worth noting that the female characters of this novel mostly pose as hurdles for Deven. Sarla, Imtiaz Begum and the Old wife of Nur are all hindrances to Deven’s interview of the great Nur. Imtiaz Begum might be one of the main deterrents for Deven.

## **Mirpore V/S Old Delhi**

These two settings have significantly affected the life of the protagonist, Deven. They are also closely linked to one of the major themes of this novel, the theme of Existentialism.

Mirpore is introduced as a polluted and manacled town, a land with limited opportunities.