

Sontag's Rhetoric in Anita Desai's *In Custody*



Kirtikumar Vitthani

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Prof. V B Shah Institute of
Management, R V Patel College
of Commerce,
Amroli, Surat, Gujarat, India

Abstract

Why we read literature is the topic having been debated since time immemorial. Anita Desai's novel has been interpreted by many critics and scholars from time to time. The present paper discusses the novel *In Custody* by Anita Desai in light of Susan Sontag's theory of interpretation. Susan Sontag in her essay *Against Interpretation* emphasizes on the outer beauty, the pleasure one gets while reading literature. She believes that it is harmful to analyze literature from the scientific approaches or else the work of art is destroyed. The novel concentrates on Deven's project and a task to interview the Urdu poet Nur and make him known to the outer world. As Urdu language and the poet himself are dying, it gives lots of problems to Deven to accomplish his task. In doing so, Deven is searching a way to satisfy his own self for Urdu poetry as he is a great admirer of Urdu poetry. He faced reality and got frustrated when he found his childhood hero and a great poet Nur in his worst condition. His disillusionment is the core part in the novel where he recognizes true existence of poetry in his own life. Finally he decides to be the guardian of the dying poetry of Nur. He feels the beauty of poetry from within and goes beyond criticism of literature.

Keywords: Interpretation, Aesthetic, Disillusionment.

Introduction

To the question of the purpose of literature, R. A. Scott-James rightly quoted Dryden,

"Dryden is more direct. Delight is the chief, if not the only, end of poesy."

(Scott-James, 2000, 141)

Literary scholars have elucidated theories and concepts which try to explain the question 'Why do we read literature?' Plato, Aristotle, Phillip Sidney and many others gave their views and opinions on the aim and purpose of literature. The paper analyses Anita Desai's *In Custody* from the perspective of Susan Sontag's theory of interpretation of a literary work of art. The paper attempts to draw a correlation between the theory and the novel with examples and arguments. There are many inter-links between these two pieces of writings. There are common issues and thoughts in both the works which raise many questions to the topic in question 'how to read literature'. Both the works discuss the function of poetry and its survival from time to time. Both the novel and the theory go parallel hand in hand. Susan Sontag, in her essay, discusses her views about interpretation of art in general and literature in particular. She has compared many arts and the interpretation of the old and the modern. *Against Interpretation* is an essay that makes the interpreter of art aware of the misunderstandings and assumptions about art. She discusses interpretation as an act of defending, understanding, or picking out certain codes and rules in the work of art.

Anita Desai expresses the aesthetics of art vis-à-vis tools of comprehending it. The novel mainly concentrates on Urdu poet Nur and Deven who loves his poetry. Deven undertakes the task to interview the poet and make him known to the outer world. He has a noble cause in his mind but he cannot manage the situation since he believes in pleasure giving quality of art and literature. As Urdu language and the poet himself are dying, it causes lots of problems to Deven to accomplish his task. In doing so, Deven is searching a way to satisfy his own love for Urdu poetry. He gets frustrated when he finds his childhood hero and a great poet Nur in his worst condition. He could not understand the co-relation between the poet and his poetry. He even realises that he lives a double life. He teaches Hindi at a college and loves Urdu which splits his personality.

Finally, he decides to be the guardian of the dying poetry of Nur. He feels the beauty of poetry from within and goes beyond criticism of literature which we can call aesthetics.

Though Anita Desai stated once that 'her novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character', her novels deal with issues which have great relevance to modern times. Her novels are not only the social documents but they are also great works of art. She herself says, "Writing is to me a process of discovering the truth – the truth that is nine-tenth of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth of visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things."

The acclaimed novel *In Custody* narrates the life of a simple man Deven Sharma. Though he teaches Hindi in a college, his passion for Urdu language give the novel its momentum. A timid, ordinary man leads his life of mediocrity with empty dreams. Through this character, Anita Desai deals with the issue which has great relevance to modern materialistic world where money seems to be the only goal worth aspiring for. What is the place of art in such a world, forms the theme of this novel. We can find the chain of actions/ incidents, one leading to another, which bring the protagonist on the verge of ruin.

Susan Sontag in her essay emphasize on the outer beauty, the pleasure one gets while reading literature. She believes that it is harmful to analyze literature from the scientific approach or else the work of art is destroyed.

Today is such a time, when the project of interpretation is largely reactionary, stifling. Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities. In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.

(Sontag, 2001, 07)

Deven has developed his interest in Nur's poetry since his childhood. Nur becomes his hero though he has never met him before. This shows the effect of art on the reader. Poetry of Nur had been never explained to Deven, yet, he enjoys it. But as soon as he takes the project to record the poetry, he finds only scribbles and scraps. It is a very strong example relevant to the above statement by Sontag. When he delivers the completed project to the authority of his college, and plays the tape, it is almost nothing. All his hard work and labour is vain.

It was a big fiasco. There was no other word for it. Disbelievingly, Deven had the first tape removed, the second tried and then the third

and the fourth. The cardboard carton that held them seemed bottomless, there were so many... When the tapes could be induced to produce sound, there seemed to be nothing to listen to – long intervals of crackling and sputtering interspersed with a sudden blare of horns from the street, the shrieking of nest-building birds, loud explosions of laughter and incoherent joviality, drunken voices bawling, singing, stopping short. Where was Nur? Occasionally his voice wandered in like some lost mendicant off a crowded street, offering a few lines of verse in a faint, foundering voice, then breaking off...

(Desai, 1984, 173)

Interpretation sometimes becomes an intellectual revenge upon art. As we find in the novel, the central idea of Deven's – rather Murad's project – is to introduce Nur and his outdated – old poetry to the outer world. But when Nur's first wife demanded money for the project, Deven drops his mission. He has no more interest for Nur's poetry then. He suddenly forgets his hero and the power of his poetry. In a way, he is trying to make it materialistic issue. But once, he gets the money from his college, he once again starts his mission, fighting with many problems, domestic as well as social. Nur's 'The World' which is so marvelous in Deven's past memories is now faded and becomes this present world – world in which Sarla and Manu are also living, world of his college. Deven's personality is torn among so many worlds in which he is living. It contributes to lose the aesthetic values of his imaginative world – the world of Nur's poetry.

Another example that can be termed as a similar kind of revenge is when Deven gets closer to Nur with some assumptions and some prejudices in his mind. He, now, wants to criticize Nur's poetry with his intellectual mind. But he finds at the end that his intellectual analysis of the poetry kills the real essence of Nur's poetry. Even the process is quite time consuming. It requires money as well as energy, and also seems less sensuousness. There was a time when he did not know Nur very closely; he was very excited by even one thought. Though he was teaching Hindi, he is a fan of Urdu poetry. But when he made got too close to Nur's life, suddenly he feels insensitive to him and his poetry.

When Deven asks Nur to recite his poetry of some particular period, Nur became very angry. His anger expresses his sad and disillusioned state of mind. It was Nur whose poetry fascinated Deven to accept the project in the beginning, and it is the same Nur who is responsible for his loss of faith in the relationship of author and his creations. Nur argued about the evergreen effect of poetry and poet. They cannot be confined to a limited space.

The effect was disastrous. Nur, in the act of reaching out for a drink,

froze. 'Poetry?' he shot at Deven, harshly. 'Poetry of the period? Do you think a poet can be ground between stones, and bled, in order to produce poetry – for *you*? You think you can switch on that mincing machine, and I will instantly produce for you length of raw, red minced meat that you can carry off to your professors to eat?'

(Desai, 1984, 156)

When Deven visits Nur, he realises that he has made a mistake. His prior assumptions did not help him. He found that Nur is not the sublime genius, not the holy hero of Deven's imagination, but an old man with problems and weaknesses. This shows no connection between the art and the artist. The poetry gives him pleasure when he is away from the reality behind it but the same poetry creates so many problems when he tries to go deep in it. What Deven had imagined, faded away.

The history of interpreting art is nothing but only defense. In the novel, *In Custody*, we can find that everybody defends themselves. Murad always finds excuses to make Deven ready to work for his journal. Deven also finds excuses to save his project and himself. He always seems to shun his responsibility. After the recording is finished and he comes to know that it is good for nothing, he blames the boy Chiku – a technical assistant and Jain the shopkeeper. He is not ready to accept the truth that Nur and his poetry are in conflict with each other.

Deven unconsciously reveals the hollowness of his project. Nur himself and his life poison the beauty of Nur's poetry. According to Sontag, interpretation is the act of mind which picks out some elements, rules and codes of interpretation to derive limited meaning of the text. That is what Deven continuously tries to find out from the poetry of Nur through Nur. He plays the role of an observer every-time whenever he meets Nur. And tries to find out or to know the reasons why Nur's poetry is so effective and why it is so different from his life. He was so alienated from the real situation that he unfortunately falls onto the wrong track. He tries to store the beautiful poetry into a scientific device. But in doing so, the aesthetic power is completely missed.

The room in which the poet lay resting, like a great bolster laid on a flat low wooden divan, was in semi darkness. Not only were the bamboo screens hanging in every doorway let down to keep out the sun that beat upon the top floor of the building most fiercely, but the walls were lined with dark green tiles that added to the shadowy gloom. The few pieces of furniture – single armchair with elongated arms that seemed designed for some earlier, larger species of man, a small gate-legged table, piled with very shabby books, a revolving bookcase with more of them,

several solid cushions and bolsters cast upon the cotton mats on the floor, were like objects carved out of this murkiness, heavy and palpable with gloom.

(Desai, 1984, 40)

The semi-darkness is symbolic here. It is the real beauty of poetry which lies within as darkness. The poet used to live in the room where there is minimum light. The sun-light is a symbol for criticism which, by nature, is interested in inward rather than outward beauty. It tries to dig out the inner most part of rhetoric and by doing so gets the facts that lie within. Consciously or unconsciously it extinguishes the pleasure one should get by feeling it.

'Urdu poetry?' he finally sighed, turning a little to one side, towards Deven although not actually addressing himself to a person, merely to a direction, it seemed. 'How can there be Urdu poetry when there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished. The defeat of the Moghuls by British threw a noose over its head, and the defeat of British by the Hindi-wallahs tightened it. So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried.' He tapped his chest with one finger.

(Desai, 1984, 42)

The dying condition of the poet and poetry points out towards the horrible nature of criticism and interpretations. The colonial and post-colonial elements and effects are revealed here in the voice of Nur. Other things like pigeons, the darkness of the house, silence are also very important which give little more idea about poet's life. Nobody in the novel can understand why Nur took so much care of pigeons. But he himself made it clear that his poetry lives with pigeons and will die with them. Even Deven finds the voice of pigeons as disturbance in his work whereas pigeons are the very soul of Nur and his poetry.

The interpretation of any work of art keeps on changing from time to time. The same thing happens in the novel. In his childhood, Deven had one particular idea about Nur's poetry but that changes as he starts to understand it. And finally when he decides to go into the depth of Nur's poetry, he finds it is disastrous. For getting to know the depth of the poetry, he has perhaps selected the wrong way- to approach Nur. The results are different from his expectations. He should have concentrated on the poetry itself. Finally, when he realises his mistake, he reconciles with the situation and gets ready to answer anything – to face any difficulty. Nur's feelings for his poetry are totally different from how Deven feels. And these both might differ from the true ones.

By interpreting any text, the interpreter claims to make it easy to understand. For example, Murad indirectly forces Deven to interview Nur and let him be popular and alive in the world. Deven takes it as a golden opportunity of keeping his hero alive by his own strength. But in doing so, the recording he

has prepared is totally rubbish. Still he claims that it should be kept in library for others to know Nur. And finally, we can find him as a guardian of Nur's poetry which he carries within. It shows that Deven has got the sense of poetry which is already there in it. It was not complete realization but it is disillusionment of a common lover of literature.

Susan Sontag says in her essay, The modern style of interpretation excavates, destroys, digs 'behind' the text to find a sub-text which is the true one. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings'. It is to turn 'the world' into 'this world'. ('This world!' As if there were any other.)

(Sontag, 2001, 07)

Nur's personal life, Deven's role in the novel, author's biography, historical background of the novel etc. are considered as complements to make the text comprehensible. But in doing so the beauty of the text gets disguised. When we relate it to any art, it harms the real charm of art. In doing so, the aesthetic power of art gets destroyed. The same thing Deven wants to do with Urdu poetry. By interviewing the great Urdu poet, he wants to know about the past, its genesis. But when he goes closer and deeper, he finds the raw material in absolute mess. After a hot discussion on the survival of Urdu versus Hindi, Nur got upset and could not digest the food. He vomited it. This nausea is very symbolic here. The substance which Deven looks as it came out of the mouth of Nur suggests inner reality. Whenever anyone tries to interpret or to analyze the poetry, he will find some indigested/ indigestible substance like Nur's vomit. Deven is asked to clean the vomit of Nur with the old papers and he did. When he was standing in the veranda with the papers in his hand...

The papers between his fingers oozed and stank. He stared at them in repulsion, not quite certain how he came to be holding them... He clutched them tightly in order to overcome his own repulsion and then did what every instinct in him told him to do – raced down the veranda, hurled himself down the stairs, broke through the door into the lane, and there dropped the parcel into the gutter, and fled. He was at the end of the lane, at the corner where the street light blazed with normality, before it occurred to him that those papers he had thrown away might have been inscribed with Nur's Poetry.

(Desai, 1984, 61-62)

It is believed that art should be judged without considering its author, culture, history or background. But Deven is trying to relate poetry with poet's past and present, which makes him somewhat bias and takes him away from the real pleasure of art. Without any prejudice, if one judges art, he may

explore innumerable dimensions, but still the merit of the work of art lies somewhere else.

Deven wants to make poetry easy to understand and to keep it alive with his project of his recording. He wants to make poetry somewhat popular in recent times and that is why he struggles throughout the novel. But at the end he fails in doing so. He understood the poetry to some extent but not completely. It is interesting to note that Deven reduces some part of the recording. If we consider the whole recording as art, it gives hint that he is trying to find out the contents to make it easy to understand, to make it acceptable so that every common person can understand it. But in fact, Deven's whole activity of making art comprehensible is for himself and not for others. All critics are doing the same! And finally the real art is replaced by what we call criticism. R. J. Rees rightly calls the production of 'books about books' as criticism,

The habit of reading too many 'books about books' is one which the students of literature should do his best to avoid. The production of such books is now almost a major industry; and for everyone reputable poet or novelist or dramatist there are probably a hundred research students, lecturers, professors or critics, all busily interpreting the *real* writers, and of course writing books about each other's books... In our time they deal with wider variety of subjects... being literary criticism of the kind which serves to divert our attention from the real works of literature we ought to be studying and enjoying.

(Rees, 1973, 17)

We can say that Nur's poetry is transferred to his second wife, Deven. It is important to note that after this transfer, it becomes an art of re-writing the text by somebody else. Unconsciously Deven becomes critic of Nur's poetry and by giving another voice to it; he is actually, altering the text. At the last day of recording, when poetry was recited by some other person, Deven loses his interest that was there in the beginning. It reflects the destruction of the original art. Art is transferred from its original and a claim is made to make it more intelligible – manageable. But in doing so, the original beauty is ruined.

The novel also points a finger towards the extinction of Arts and Humanities departments in the universities. When Deven goes for the fund for his project of recording of Nur's poetry, he depicts the status of Humanities departments.

Not being sure either what the status of Urdu department was, he could not predict how the proposal would be met. He was perfectly aware that funds were being made readily available to the science departments, that the sciences

were the rajas of the empire with the humanities pushed to the dustier and ore neglected corner where they languished. If any of the humanities departments received any attention, it was usually economics and political science. The languages were not considered departments worthy of any attention of the financial kind beyond the meager funds allocated to the library.

(Desai, 1984, 102)

Deven also tries to separate the poet and his poetry as in the episode of vomiting. It is impossible to sift them. They are like body and soul. The interview is taken into brothel that shows again the importance of an art not its meaning – history, time, and place. The place of interview is arranged by Nur's first wife who does not know anything about poetry and is only interested in money. She is quite similar to Murad as he too, is interested only in the article.

We should receive art as it is instead of dissecting it. The beauty of art lies within the art itself. It does not lie in the life of the poet or its interpretation by the interpreter or in the mind of the reader. There is no interpretation, all are misinterpretations. So many interpretations can be possible or made possible of any art. Even the title seems problematic because of its meanings. It has positive and negative interpretations. Instead of doing its scientific analysis, we should enjoy it from the very soul. In the end, Deven accepts Nur's poetry from within. He gets the courage to face the difficulties in being the custodian of his hero's poetry. Without making use of our brains, we should feel the charm of the poetry at heart. Art appeals to heart rather than mind.

A person or art looks beautiful only when they are alive. We can dissect the content but only to see more, not to murder it. The criticism of art should be transparent. It should only give a cue to understand the art. To interpret does not mean to criticize. Further, one requires more attention from the heart to see more, to feel more and to hear more. Our senses should be very powerful and attentive if we really want to enjoy art. Only then can we have enough courage to keep art in our custody, to have its

guardianship. Otherwise, it becomes an imprisonment like it happens with Deven.

While returning

... he tried to return to his old idolatry of the poet, his awe of him, his devotion when it had still been pure, and his gratitude for his poetry and friendship, that strange, unexpected, unimaginable friendship that had brought him so much pain.

That friendship still existed, even if there had been a muddle, a misunderstanding. He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into safe custody, and not realized that if he was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too. This alliance could be considered an unendurable burden – or else a shining honour.

(Desai, 1984, 203)

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to emphasize rhetorical reading of literature.

Conclusion

The spiritual relation that continues even after the death of the great poet, give the gist of the real aesthetics which literature always acquires.

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