



# **Journey of the Displaced from Idealization to Realization in Anita Desai's *In Custody***

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## **ABSTRACT:**

*Displacement cannot be bound to any single aspect but tends to include anything and everything that marks the distance and shift in real or ideal sense. This paper focuses on the eye opening journey of the protagonist of Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*. Enamoured by the flimsy cobweb of his idealism Deven stops to grow which makes him a misfit in his familial, social and professional life. A chance to interview his ideal Urdu poet Nur proves to be chance to bring him face to face with the reality of his abject failure. Dejected, rejected and thrown to the corridors of lamentation. He realized that the life lived and the life desired may not be necessarily and seemingly same. This meeting serves him from falling down in the same abyss. He may not turn out to be an epitome of perfection but at least he has touched upon the realization not to glide down.*

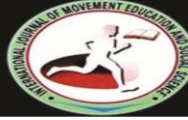
**Keywords :** *Displacement, Disillusionment, Idealization, Illusion, Realization*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Displacement reflects some sort of key shift in space or time: in the physical sciences, the displacement of air in an engine, of water by a ship's hull, of the earth's crust in various theories of global rebalancing; in the social sciences, time spent on the computer displaces face-to-face sociability and time spent watching television displaces reading. Displacement entered the sociopolitical discourse that feeds postcolonial studies in the sense of the forced geographical removal of individuals from their home or home regions; the people thus removed become displaced persons, also known as forced migrants or refugees. The term was later extended metaphorically to cultural displacements without geographical removal, when a foreign power invades, occupies, imposes a new ideosomatic regulation on other group, "displacing" the old cultural regime through education and other forms of social and institutional discipline.

In its most literal sense, "displacement" refers to the act of moving or being put out of the usual or original place. On other denotative plane, displacement is defined in various capacities.

Displacement is the forcing of people away from the area or country where they live. (Collins Dictionary). It also refers to "the situation in which people are forced to leave the place where they normally live" (Cambridge



Dictionary).Where insiders/outsideers “Force (someone) to leave their home, typically because of war, persecution, or natural disaster”(Oxford Dictionary).

## II.MULTIPLICITY OF DISPLACEMENT

Displacement may be perceived as voluntary or involuntary. It can take various forms, depending on the relative circumstances in which it happens. Migration, desertion, exile, diaspora, exodus, eviction, banishment, travel, discovery, imprisonment, escape, among others, are all different forms of displacement and, as such, these conditions might share many traits. Displacement commonly forces subjects to deal with a sense of loss, alienation, and disorientation, but it may also lead displaced subjects to experience a taste of newly gained power and freedom. In any case, the displaced undergo a process of transformation and renewal that involves a (collected or distraught) re-fashioning of identity. As a metaphor, displacement can also describe a wide range of phenomena, from social mobility to imperialistic conquest, intellectual retreat, marginalization, and gender crossing.

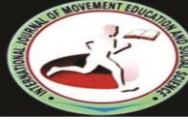
No doubt in the past century; the world has witnessed a large-scale displacement and dispersal of populations across the world as a result of major political upheavals, which include the two World Wars, decolonization, partition, communal violence, the Cold war etc. Besides these, globalization, industrialization, emergence of new information and faster transportation accelerated the movement of people and commodities which has resulted into acculturation and displacement. This transnational mobility breeds a sense of displacement and dislocation among the people. This may be the result of forced or voluntary migration, of self-exile or expulsion. Refugees, people *in transit*, may be the product of war, ethnic conflict and natural calamity.

Various forms of displacement such as exile, diaspora, and migration have been extensively explored in fiction writing. A great number of authors have shown these concerns in their works. The prominent writers include Salman Rushdie, Amitov Ghosh, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Meena Alexander, Hanif Kureishi, Mohsin Hamid, Bapsi Sidhwa, Jhumpa Lahiri, Upmanyu Chatterji, Khaled Hosseini, Radhika Jha, Khushwant Singh, V. S. Naipaul, Cyril Dabydeen, David Dabydeen, Sam Selvon, M. G. Vassanji, Subramani, K. S. Maniam, Shani Muthoo, Marina Budhos, etc. Being the post colonial writers, they have vocalized the problems of cultural conflicts, alienation, displacement, identity crisis in their own distinct ways.

Displacement in different lights has been critically evaluated.

Critics remark on the nature of the diaspora, a form of displacement. R. Renukadevi argues that diaspora depends on the nature of the host country. Diasporas, despite their common origin, may behave in a totally different manner depending on the country of the re-location. (Renukadevi, 2018, 292)

Sushil Kumar has probed into the sense of cultural dislocation and identity crisis in exile. Deeply cherishing Indian values, the immigrants often miss their own heritage, culture and above all ‘Home’. Though set in UK and USA, they talk of the cultural vibrancy and sentiments of Indians. It is the native culture they encounter every now and then. They become nostalgic and feel deprived in their dreamland. Their sentiments search for geo-national and socio linguistic identity in their ‘heartland’. They cry out for identity constructions. They have their own valid versions of national Identity. (Kumar, 2018, 53)



Trish Brooking focuses on the experiences of Polish child refugees in World War II, some of whom were relocated to New Zealand. For these Polish children, arrival in New Zealand was a challenging and bewildering process. Displacement, on such a scale, underscores the depth of cultural trauma and its manifestations in the selected texts. His work probes how children's literature that depicts the experiences of Polish child refugees situates itself within a discourse of cultural trauma. (Brooking, 2015, 61)

Devendra Rankawat argues that the experience of being in diaspora, or the experience of being in separation, is an experience of dislocation (up-rooting) and relocation (re-rooting). It stings upon human consciousness and afflicts the pain of having lost something forever which is neither recoverable nor replaceable nor even substitutable. It thus causes unbridgeable cracks in the human self. (Rankawat, 2017, 5)

Suman Gupta finds that the homeland is the country an individual is born in, has roots in its culture and language and one's cultural roots bind him/her to that particular land even when he/she is distanced from it. Home is that space which an individual chooses to live in; but home can also be the memory of a place to which one is connected to emotionally. Distance from the homeland can be both physical and mental, because the space where the individual strikes roots may not be the country of his/her origin but the place he/she is most attached to. Home becomes a relative term signifying location and identity. The diasporic location becomes a liminal space where identity is reconstructed through the issues of longing and belonging. (Gupta, 2015, 15)

S. Kanakaraj argues that people all over the world suffer Diaspora as an inevitable condition in their lives commonly. Consequentially, they acutely experience nostalgia and cultural divide. The Westernized Indian experiences it in India and the Indian who emigrates to Europe or America experiences Diaspora and the consequential cultural divide. A Westernized Indian longs for the company of another Westernized Indian, while staying in India because of passing through cultural hiatus. Diaspora, disorientation, re-orientation, nostalgia and cultural divide run together. The loss of the past is painful. Equally painful are Diaspora, nostalgia and cultural divide. Severe homesickness, sorrowful longing for conditions of the past age, and regretful or wistful memory of earliest time mark nostalgia. Thus nostalgia is a substitute gratification and carries a stigma in its excess, whereas reminiscence is just a collection of some past event. (Kanakaraj, 2015, 159)

In this context Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* stands as a milestone. The story of *In Custody* revolves around Deven, a Hindi lecturer, enamoured of Urdu language and Urdu poetry, who feels displaced in his own country owing to his inability adapt to the changing social reality. He goes through a series of Quixotic-like adventures when asked by a friend, an editor of an Urdu magazine, to interview a famous Urdu poet Nur. During this journey, which he embarks on to overcome his sense of displacement, he goes through illusion, disillusionment and to get realization.

### III. DISPLACEMENT OF DEVEN

The agony of the protagonist Deven is that he lives a very fragmented life. He has an innate inability to feel belonged and rooted. As a child, he has been brought up in a contradictory milieu. His father, an Urdu enthusiast, an ardent lover of Urdu poetry was a poor teacher. Deven's love for Urdu is an inheritance from a poor, asthmatic and embittered father who struggled throughout against his miserable existence.



Sole dependence on the efforts of a widow never provides Deven an opportunity to rise above his social, personal and existential pettiness. The town, Mirpore where he lives itself, is symbolic of isolation and displacement with no history of its own. “Lacking a river” (IC, 14) and an “addiction to total dehydration” (IC, 15) indicate that the landscape lacks imagination and creativity and makes Deven feel “its solidarity, its stubbornness had formed a trap” (IC, 17) and has become “the impassable desert” (IC, 18).

The conflict in his martial life is an additional scar to his ruptured being. He is not comfortable in his ill matched marriage as he “had been more a poet than a professor when he married Sarla” but “for the wife of a poet” Sarla “seemed too prosaic” (IC, 69). Dissonance in married life and failure in attaining his career pursuits add to his sense of disjointedness. He wanted to be a professor and poet of Urdu but despite his passion for Urdu language and Urdu poetry, he has to take up teaching Hindi to accommodate market demands.

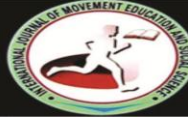
He becomes a lowly paid temporary college lecturer struggling to earn a living. He confesses, “I took my degree in Hindi.... It is my living.... I am a married man, a family man”(IC, 40). A mismatch between his passion and profession makes him an ineffective teacher and he fails to create interest and attain mastery in the subject. He struggles to control the class and very often he notices, “the expression of boredom, amusement, insolence and defiance” (IC, 5) on the faces of his students. While teaching the students, he looks outside the class towards an imaginary audience which makes him an utterly artless teacher. His insipid effort to teach Hindi is largely attributed to his own lack of interest in the subject and never challenged by his love and admiration for Urdu.

Neither he earns any reputation from his students nor does he develop any rapport with his colleagues. His colleagues often accuse him of his double standards as he likes Urdu but teaches Hindi. He falls prey to abject apathy and ignorance of the people around him as one of his colleagues describes Urdu “*a right to left language*” and the head of the Hindi department reprimands him for his passion for Urdu poetry, “I’ll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu department. I won’t have Muslim toadies in my department; you’ll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language” (IC, 158). In this situation, he finds himself misfit and feels displaced. His submission to commercial demands of the time and choosing profession over passion makes him a diffident, unimpressive and unassertive character. It seems that there is no ending to his miseries.

His material and intellectual pursuits remain unattended as “he had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings. The latter was constantly assaulted by and wrecked by the former...”(IC, 20).

#### IV. ILLUSION OF DEVEN

Deven’s release from his desolated state remains a far-flung reality until an unscheduled meeting between him and an old childhood friend Murad takes place. Murad travels from Delhi to Mirpore, to involve Deven in his latest project and sow the seeds of his illusive journey from Mirpore to Delhi. Deven is coerced by Murad to interview the renowned Delhi poet Nur Shahjahanabadi for a “special issue” of his Urdu journal *Awaz*. Nur, in his prime, was a celebrated Urdu poet and had a worldwide audience and admirers as Murad describes Nur “... the light that blazes in centre and sends it its rays to all corners of the world where his verse is known-in Iran, Iraq, Malasiya, Russia, Sweden...” and also claims to have sent “his name for the Nobel Prize Committee” (IC, 10). Nur’s high stature in the world of Urdu poetry is further confirmed by Deven when he excitedly claims “no



special issue on Urdu poetry would be complete if it did not have some verse by Nur..."(IC, 10). Deven himself is an ardent admirer of Nur. The offer of interviewing Nur elates him and he is quick to forget "for the time the noisy surroundings, the empty plates, even the foul breath from Murad's mouth..."(IC, 11).

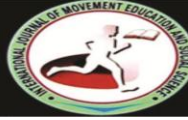
The opportunity of meeting his idol Nur and interviewing him appears "the comet, swift and pale in the dark" (IC, 11), a possibility to hoist himself from the dust of anonymity and make his existence a meaningful one. Deven grabs this opportunity with much eagerness as it appears to him a chance to overcome his failures. For the very first time in his life he feels excited. The idea of meeting his idol gives him immense pleasure. The responsibility thrust upon him elates him and he somewhat feels confident. He has always found himself disjoined and displaced from the world around him. Meeting with Nur seems to him a chance to get himself connected and rooted. In this hope, he very excitedly looks forward to this meeting and even takes pride in the thought that he has been selected for interviewing Nur. He goes home and prepares for the journey. He is intoxicated with the joy of meeting his idol and feels like achieving the purpose of his life as "nothing in his life had prepared him for an occasion of this scale" (IC, 19). He reaches Delhi and standing before "tightly shut wooden doors" (IC, 34) of Nur's house feels, "opening of them will open the avenue for the salvation" (IC, 34) and imagines "a magical world that lies beyond these doors" (IC, 34). Knocking at them, he hears "an immense voice, cracked and hoarse and throny..." asking with annoyance "who is that disturbs the sleep of the aged at this hour of the afternoon that is given to rest?" (IC, 35). Deven's joy finds no bounds as he feels elated hearing the voice and the words that "...could only belong to that superior being, the poet." (IC, 35).

When he enters the dilapidated house he feels "... warm, moist tide of jubilation..." on being invited "into the presence of man so clearly a hero" (IC, 35). While ascending the flight of staircase that leads to Nur's room he imagines, "as if God had leaned over a cloud and called for him to come up and angles might have been drawing him up these ancient splintered stairs to meet the deity..." (IC, 36) and concludes "this, surely, was the summons for which he had been waiting all these empty years..." (IC, 36). Step after step he feels rising from his mean, muddled and bleak existence into a higher sphere and ushering into a new and wondrously illuminated era.

## V.DISILLUSIONMENT OF DEVEN

In his fantasy, Deven draws an extremely unrealistic and superlative picture of Nur. Unknowingly, he prepares a perfect recipe for an ultimate debacle of his ideals regarding the Urdu poetry and its poet. The cracks in his mythical castle start appearing when he enters Nur's room. He becomes instrumental in disturbing Nur's afternoon sleep which annoys Nur. The heavy figure of Nur whimpers, gets annoyed, shouts at Deven and calls him a fool. Deven doesn't mind Nur's rude behaviour as he is so carried away by the thought of meeting his idol. Deven introduces himself as a lecturer of Hindi and a lover of Urdu poetry which disappoints Nur and he says "it seems you have been sent here to torment me, to show me to what depths Urdu has fallen..." (IC, 41). Nur's bitterness for Hindi is very evident when he retorts, "those Congresswallahs have set up Hindi on top as our ruler..." (IC, 40) and condemns Deven to teach Hindi in the college and calls him the assassin of Urdu language. Deven, in his meek defence, tries to justify himself by saying "must teach to support my family" (IC, 40). He fails to receive a word of sympathy from his idol. Deven fumbles to mend his splintered dignity by





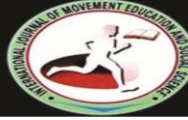
flaunting his love for Urdu poetry but Nur mercilessly shreds it further by saying, “Urdu poetry? How can there be Urdu poetry where there is no Urdu language left. It is dead, finished” and pointing towards himself says, “so now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried” (IC, 39). He blames changing political scenario of the country for the fall of Urdu as he claims “the defeat of the Moghuls by the British threw a noose over its (Urdu) head, and the defeat of the British by Hindiwallahs tightened it” (IC, 39).

Deven feels very embarrassed. He tries to pacify and impress the senile poet by reciting few of his poems but his effort is abruptly aborted when Nur’s servant enters the room followed by the crowd of unruly and vulgar guests. After their arrival the indecent bouts of eating, drinking and recitations of cheap Urdu poetry continue throughout the evening. Deven is shocked to see his hero surrounded by drunkards who recite Nur’s poetry in the most blatant and down to earth reactions. He feels hurt when he finds Nur also enjoying and making fun of him. Moreover, he is disappointed to see his make believe God behaving so savagely in the company of the equally savage friends. In his imagination, he had pictured Nur surrounded by elderly, sage and dignified literary men or else entirely alone in divine isolation. In his assumed sophistication of a much celebrated Urdu poet, he has aspired to meet a hero who has an indelible impression on his mind with his poetry but whom he actually meets, is a debilitated old man who has lost his creativity and surrounded by parasitical companions.

He notices that Nur has mysteriously disappeared from the scene. He hears noises coming from one of the distant rooms of the house. It is a child’s wailing, a woman’s screaming and a “...sound of protest possibly from Nur -certainly in an aged and weak strain”(IC, 58). Trail of the sounds takes him to a closed room. With countless apprehensions, he pushes open the door to find Nur lying on the floor face downwards. Nur’s wife Intiaz Beghum, a fierce woman is howling at Nur and asking him to get up and get cleaned himself. Deven, to his extreme disgust finds Nur smeared in his own vomit. The woman never stops shouting and Nur’s feeble defence fails to pacify her. Deven becomes an eyewitness to this struck by pity. Deven leaps forward and supports Nur to get up but the woman yells “...leave that poor beast on the floor and go and clean it up”(IC, 59). Deven looks up in utter helplessness. The woman, in the fit of rage, keeps blurting abuses on Nur, his rogue companions and Deven too. Meanwhile Nur meekly and vainly tries to defend himself only to intensify the anger of the fierce tigress. She hurls a bundle of papers at Deven and asks him to clean the filth scattered in the room. Deven hurriedly scrubs the floor and pleads the woman to have mercy on Nur but fails to incite any glimmer of it. Feeling ashamed and helpless, he slips out of the room tightly clutching the stinking bundle of the paper. The horrid images of the evening keep haunting Deven. Between his joyful entry in the house and doleful exit much happens, enough to add more tremors to his ever wobbly being. The strange dismal feelings of despondence, disillusionment and dejection dismember him from his delicate dreams of meeting Nur. After this abject failure to realize the dream of meeting his idol, he abandons the idea of interviewing Nur and crawls back to his cocoon.

## **V.REALIZATION OF DEVEN**

A disastrous meeting with Nur awakens Deven to a series of realizations. His feelings of dislocation and disconnect to his surroundings become stronger than ever. He finds his sweet dream “twisted into nightmare”(IC, 64) and he feels so embittered with his experience of his meeting with Nur that now “any reality



was preferable”(IC, 64). He tries hard to settle down with his unhappy reality in order to achieve some solace so he spends time with his son and avoids his wife. One evening his wife Sarla “with an eloquent sniff”(IC, 77) thrusts him with a post card. The post card is an invitation from Nur and proposal for Deven to be his secretary, but after that horrid experience, Deven is not ready for another. He shows least interest in accepting his proposal, but it is Murad who forces him to accept the invitation and go to Nur and conduct an interview for his magazine Awaz. Deven resists a lot but Murad lures him considering it “an honour, a very great honour...” and “... a golden chance to learn the art of poetry from a great master...”(IC, 79). Finally, Deven gives up and agrees to interview Nur again.

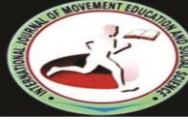
Deven arrives at Nur’s house on the birthday of his wife, Imtiaz Beghum. The sight of a large gathering at Nur’s house perplexes Deven. He assumes that crowd has gathered there to listen to Nur’s recitation of his poetry. But he is utterly shocked to see Imtiaz singing Nur’s poetry in an extremely melodramatic, stagey and profane manner. He feels disgusted at the sight of crowd swaying their heads in joy on Imtiaz Beghum’s raunchy recital and Nur’s unnoticed, ignored, secluded and dejected presence there. Nur appears a pitiable and helpless figure. He moves towards him, sits there for a while and finally they both leave the gathering to retire to a room where Nur confides in Deven, “she wanted my house, my audience, my friends” (IC, 89). Nur agrees for an interview and also promises to confine with him his unpublished new verses as he says “I have many poems...many I could tell you –never written down...”(IC, 94). He tries to record Nur’s interview and poetry on a tape recorder. During the recording sessions with Nur, Deven suddenly feels connected to his ideal and a sense of pity overwhelms him. While reciting his poems Nur gets emotional and starts lamenting, “They are over, my writing days...the music it is over”(IC, 190). He sounds heartbroken and defeated when he says “....let me go to what I have been waiting for- six feet of earth in the cemetery by the mosque” (IC, 191). Deven urges him to stay back and resume his interview but he refutes “all one can resume at my age is the primordial sleep. I am going to curl upon my bed like a child in its mother’s womb and I shall sleep, shall wait for sleep to come” (IC, 191) and leaves. This fills Deven with empathy and pity for the poet. Deven realizes that Nur, a celebrated poet of the yesteryears, is now rubble of the glorious past of his former self.

In the state of the newly dawned awareness he tries to evaluate Nur’s genius apart from his present pathetic condition. He acknowledges him as a pure artist ignoring his all human blemishes. Earlier, Deven would imagine himself as a trapped animal as “...marriage, family and a job...” have placed him in a cage but a close familiarity with the poet makes him realize even Nur has not escaped his own cage as “he was as trapped as Deven”(IC, 146).

He feels himself getting connected to Nur with the ties of unconditional devotion of an admirer. He realizes that by sharing his poetry Nur has appointed him as the custodian of his artistic genius. The very thought fills him with sense of pride and he walks back home feeling enriched, fulfilled and rooted.

## VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, displacement creates vacuum in the most unfulfilling and indescribable way. Deven gets the chance to face the void, its challenges and overcame the hurdle through his meeting with Nur an eminent Urdu poet. His collapse, alienation, coarseness have corroded his aesthetic delicacy. His failure to stand up to his own



aura, bask in the glory of his finesse and act as a torch bearer to show the path to others are strong enough to jostle Deven of his illusory fascination with the make believe world of delicacy. The void in the life now scares him to get hold of something substantiated in his life. The hollowness shrieks loud enough to make Deven realize that ideals need reality to stand on. The absence makes its presence known and realized to pull down Deven on a track that may save the soul of Deven.

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