

THE DISPLACEMENT OF ART AND POETRY IN MODERN INDIA ACCORDING TO ANITA DESAI'S 'IN CUSTODY'

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Abstract

In custody is a profound meditation on the crisis of contemporary art. Faced with the era of capitalism, art can no longer be measured by its own worth but only be measured by how well it sells. Metaphysical musings on life, death and poetry have no place in such a landscape. The novel is then a profound indictment of the spiritual and cultural destitution of capitalism. The death of Urdu poetry is a metaphor for the death of India's rich cultural history. Indeed the novel is ironically named *In Custody* when the British have been anything but benevolent and just as custodians, instituting in its place a shallow system of values entrenched in capitalism and robbing India of her native language. *In Custody* is thus a profound indictment of Colonialism and the attendant erosion to its culture it brings.

In Anita Desai's *In Custody*, the death of the ancient form of poetry, Urdu is mourned. Deven is a lowly paid professor struggling to earn a living whose passion is Urdu poetry but has since taken up teaching Hindi instead to accommodate market demands of the current state of literature.

It is Urdu poetry that truly enchants him and moves him but because Urdu is a dying art in India he has shifted to accommodate the times and teaches a subject that he does not feel much for solely for the purpose of making a living.

Indeed the status of art and poetry seems dire in the nation according to Desai's depiction. Modern sensibilities have moved on from Urdu with the advent of British colonialism and the widespread adoption of Hindi which has more market demand. Deven struggles to make a living teaching Hindi which he feels nothing for but has trained himself in so as to accommodate marketplace tastes. He has thus betrayed his passion for commercial interests, indeed this is Desai's lament on the state of art in India.

Desai's comment thus seems to be that art and poetry have lost their place in modern colonial India. In the capitalist society that has emerged, art is measured by its market worth and whether it has market appeal. Urdu is an ancient art form that has been displaced by Hindi and the more popular colonial English. Desai thus seems to be commenting that India has lost its heritage and culture with the advent of colonialism, and its art has been betrayed to the commercialization and enterprise the British have instituted.

All this is evident in the frail and dying figure of eminent poet Nur who has been forgotten and displaced by society and lives in abject poverty with his ailing wife. Once an eminent and well known poet revered by many, he has been reduced to living on the margins of society because his art has been forgotten and marginalized. When sent by Murad, a despicable and exploitative publisher to interview him, Deven finds him in an abject and shabby state of deterioration. What was once a glorious and mighty art form has been forgotten and marginalized like this poet. Nur expresses surprise and mockery that Deven has come to interview him because he knows that his art, like himself is in its death throes.

Desai's comment thus seems to be that the forces of modernization in the form of a capitalist society and enterprise instituted by the British, as well as the spread of colonial English, have seen to the death of Urdu poetry. Modernization has thus betrayed one of India's oldest art forms and seen it relinquished to a status of no value because it has lost its commercial appeal.

Indeed this is a state not peculiar to India but most postcolonial societies in the world including Singapore. The usurper's language is made widespread and dominant while the native's tongue is suppressed in favour of the usurpers'. Postcolonial societies are thus robbed of their identity and history, including their vernacular language.

The triumph of market forces and commercialization seem to be epitomized by the sleazy figure of Murad, who is only interested in profits and exploiting the guileless Deven, and trying to sensationalize Urdu poetry in order to reap a profit rather than taking any genuine interest in Urdu poetry. Murad is only interested in exploiting Deven to produce a hit issue of Urdu's last survivor Nur, and it is clear that money and profits drive his interest in Nur rather than any genuine love of art.

Indeed the life of art in India seems to be in peril with the advent of colonialism. Deven struggles to make a living as a lecturer teaching Hindi texts he does not feel for but is forced to do so because it is what sells currently. He struggles to support his wife who had dreams of marrying a university professor in order to climb in society but finds that dream has come to naught as they live hand to mouth. They literally live lives of struggling artists, with Deven finding himself in a passionless job teaching literature he does not feel for but which he has to because it sells and has market value.

The themes of Desai's novel are universal and not peculiar to India. With the advent of capitalism and its triumph worldwide in most modern societies, art is measured solely in terms of its exchange value and its ability to sell. Artists find themselves betrayed to the forces of capitalism which measures their work and its worth solely in terms of its marketability.

True artistic merit does not matter in this climate. What matters is populist sentiment and the ability of art to market and brand itself. With older artists like Nur, who do not care for artistic repackaging in order to meet market demands, it is indeed a slow and painful death.

The real enemy of art is thus capitalism as well as colonialism in destroying a vernacular culture and replacing it with the usurpers' tongue. When art is measured solely by its marketability instead of whether it has artistic integrity and worth, it is mediocrity and shallow art forms that rule because they cater to populist tastes rather than artistic sensibility.

Yet whether this is all a tragedy depends on whose notion of art one is referring to. Indeed, is art autonomous and can its value be determined independently of whether it has appeal? Yet it becomes clear that Nur's art is an art of depth in its existential and spiritual musings of a philosophical nature that clearly show much depth. The society that has no place for such art needs to be indicted on account of its superficiality and lack of artistic vision.

Popular art panders to mass culture and produces soothing visions of what the public wishes to hear rather than with discomfiting visions of the hard truths about life. When everything is reduced to market value, sensationalism and mediocrity rule as popular taste desires what is appealing on the surface rather than what has intrinsic artistic worth.

Deep philosophical truths and intense spiritual visions have no place because they require the digestion of discomfiting truths of life such as the place of morality and religion when agnostic society is caught up with materialistic rather than spiritual values.

The place of the artist in modern society is thus uncertain. Traditionally, art had been called to hold up a mirror to society and expose its flaws as well as pronounce judgement on it. With the commercialization of art, the role of art as critique and indictment is diluted because this is not what sells and not what the public wishes to hear, Art then thrives on producing superficial illusions and deceptions that sell rather than providing genuine insight into the nature of life and existence.

Art has thus become a commodity in capitalist society, to be purchased and consumed. Like any other commodity, it requires mass appeal in order to survive and hence artistic standards are compromised in favour of saleability. Nur's poetry has become marginalized because it is not popular culture and does not have mass appeal. It is too philosophical and its musings on God, religion and death have no place in a society that thrives on surfaces and fashion. These are market forces at work rather than any measure of the intrinsic worth of a piece of art.

The attempt to record Nur on tapes can be seen as an attempt to turn Nur's art into a commodity. This again fails because the recording session goes miserably, it shows how Nur as an artist defies and transcends being turned into a mass product to be marketed and consumed. Nur defies being turned into a record, a duplicate or mere reproduction of the original because this reproduction does not capture the aura of the original work of art which is lost in reproduction.

There is thus the contrast of old art versus new art. Old art is not reproducible, it does not pander to market tastes, it is not commodified, it does not live by the law of profits. It does not have to appeal to populist ideals or the mass market. This is in stark contrast to the popular culture that we witness today. Vulgar and mediocrity rules in popular culture and popular music.

The status of literature, as high culture as opposed to popular culture, thus comes into question as well. Literature, by its very definition, is an elite enterprise because it caters to the few enlightened ones who appreciate its cultural merit. It is distinct from popular culture which caters to populist appeal. In this age of instant twitter and facebook updates where all that matters is the spontaneity of the message rather than depth and reflection, it seems natural that disciplines like literature and poetry are experiencing a slow death.

'In Custody' is then very much as much a treatise on art and its place in modern society as it is a postcolonial indictment of the loss of a vernacular art and language. It is an indictment of the commodification of art in capitalist society and its subsequent dilution as market values and popular culture hold no place for metaphysical musings on death, religion and life.

Nur and Deven are seen as the last defenders of art in their society in an era which is fast vanishing and losing out to mass produced technology and where the book is losing out to the sound recording and television, much like print is losing to the internet and kindle today. What is lamented is very much the aura and originality of a work of art as well as its authenticity and depth, untainted by market forces and the need to appeal to a mass market.

‘In Custody’ is then not merely postcolonial critique but an indictment of the modern trappings of capitalism and technology and the displacement to culture it causes. What is lost is the authenticity and depth of art such a society produces. Nur is aware that he is dying and there is no place for him in the new era of exchange value and recordings. He is aware that modern society cares not for spirituality and metaphysical musings in its cult of materialism and reduction of everything to a commodity.

‘In Custody’ then speaks to us all about the purpose of art as well. If the purpose of art is to edify, if the purpose of art is didactic and instructional, then it must transcend the forces of the market as such didactic and edifying purposes will not have mass appeal. There is also a comment on the spiritual vacuity of capitalism and modernity as everything is measured by its monetary value and values are materialistic rather than spiritual.

Indeed art is an enterprise that transcends monetary value. This seems to be the chief claim of the book. Nur’s art comes from an age in which art was created purely for its own sake. It cared not for branding and packaging as well as marketability. It was performed rather than recorded or mass duplicated. ‘In Custody’ seems to be nostalgic about such an age where art was done solely for its own purpose rather than to sell in a marketplace.

The commentary on the current state of artists in the book as impoverished and lowly esteemed by society is also a comment on the cultural and spiritual decay that has taken place in society with the advent of capitalism. Nur and Deven barely get by in society and live a hand to mouth existence. That it is Murad, a publisher with no ethics who seems to be thriving is very much an indictment of the current moral climate of society.

In this way the themes of the book are very much universal rather than restricted to a lament on the postcolonial dilution of identity. Modern society has eroded the place of genuine art. Modern society measures the worth of everything in terms of monetary value, leaving high art rendered worthless because it does not have the mass appeal of popular culture.

This brings us to the state of dejection both Nur and Deven are in because art has no place in society. Nur lives a life of abject poverty, as does Deven. What they share in common is a genuine love for Urdu poetry which is dying because it refuses to adapt to the mass market or sensationalize itself as Murad would have it by hoping to produce a hit recording of Nur. This is the stereotype of the struggling artist, yet it is exacerbated by the modern condition of capitalism which would measure products solely in terms of their exchange value.

Another problem that Nur and Deven face is that their art is too abstract for modern society which loves mediocrity in the form of popular culture. Reflections on death and religion are considered out of place in a mediatised society which celebrates sex and fashion instead. This very much resonates with Jean Baudrillard’s observation that everything becomes images in postmodern society. It is the triumph of surface and the image in place of depth and Murad’s wish to record Nur instead of interview him reflects this.

The reality then is that there is no place for art in modern society because art will not compromise its standards to become marketable or measure itself solely on monetary terms. Art is distinct from the realm of commerce because its role is didactic and hence has to exist over and above its marketability. The emergence of popular culture is an example of the commodification of art.

The future of art in modern society thus remains uncertain. With the democratization of art through the internet and publishing where everything is made as good as anything else and with the demise of publishing houses to determine the quality of what is being published it becomes apparent that standards are a thing of the past and high art or high culture will find it

very difficult to thrive against the onslaught of popular culture with its commodity fetishism and its thriving on superficial mass appeal.

In terms of postcolonial concerns, the loss of the vernacular tongue in terms of Urdu poetry and its displacement by English as well as Hindi is mourned. Also mourned is the death of pre-capitalist society where art could thrive solely for its own sake, without being subject to market forces or value. The colonial British empire has instituted capitalism bringing with it a dilution of spiritual and artistic values. Also implied is the spiritual and artistic destitution of capitalism.

Indeed it is implied that India has been robbed of its heritage with the onslaught of colonialism. The death of Urdu is the death of India's rich heritage which Deven vows to defend in the end. Urdu is a metaphor for India's culture and heritage which in the form of Nur is dying. It has been replaced by crass capitalism and mass culture, much to the detriment of India's history and heritage.

'In Custody' is then a mourning of a pre-colonial age where art thrived on its own merit and India had not been ravished by the imposition of a foreign tongue as well as a commercialization of its culture. The commercialization of art and the subsequent loss of depth it brings to art is lamented. The measuring of objects solely in terms of exchange value as well as the commodification of art is lamented.

To reflect on the novel's title, India has left its custodianship to the British, but the British have plundered India of her rich heritage and left India bereft of culture. The British are then not benevolent or responsible custodians instead leaving India stripped bare of her identity and history.

The novel is also a profound meditation on the crisis of contemporary art. Faced with the era of capitalism, art can no longer be measured by its own worth but only be measured by how well it sells. Metaphysical musings on life, death and poetry have no place in such a landscape. The novel is then a profound indictment of the spiritual and cultural destitution of capitalism.

The death of Urdu poetry is a metaphor for the death of India's rich cultural history. Indeed the novel is ironically named *In Custody* when the British have been anything but benevolent and just as custodians, instituting in its place a shallow system of values entrenched in capitalism and robbing India of her native language. *In Custody* is thus a profound indictment of Colonialism and the attendant erosion to its culture it brings,.

Work Cited:

Desai, Anita. *In Custody*. Vintage Books, London. 1999.