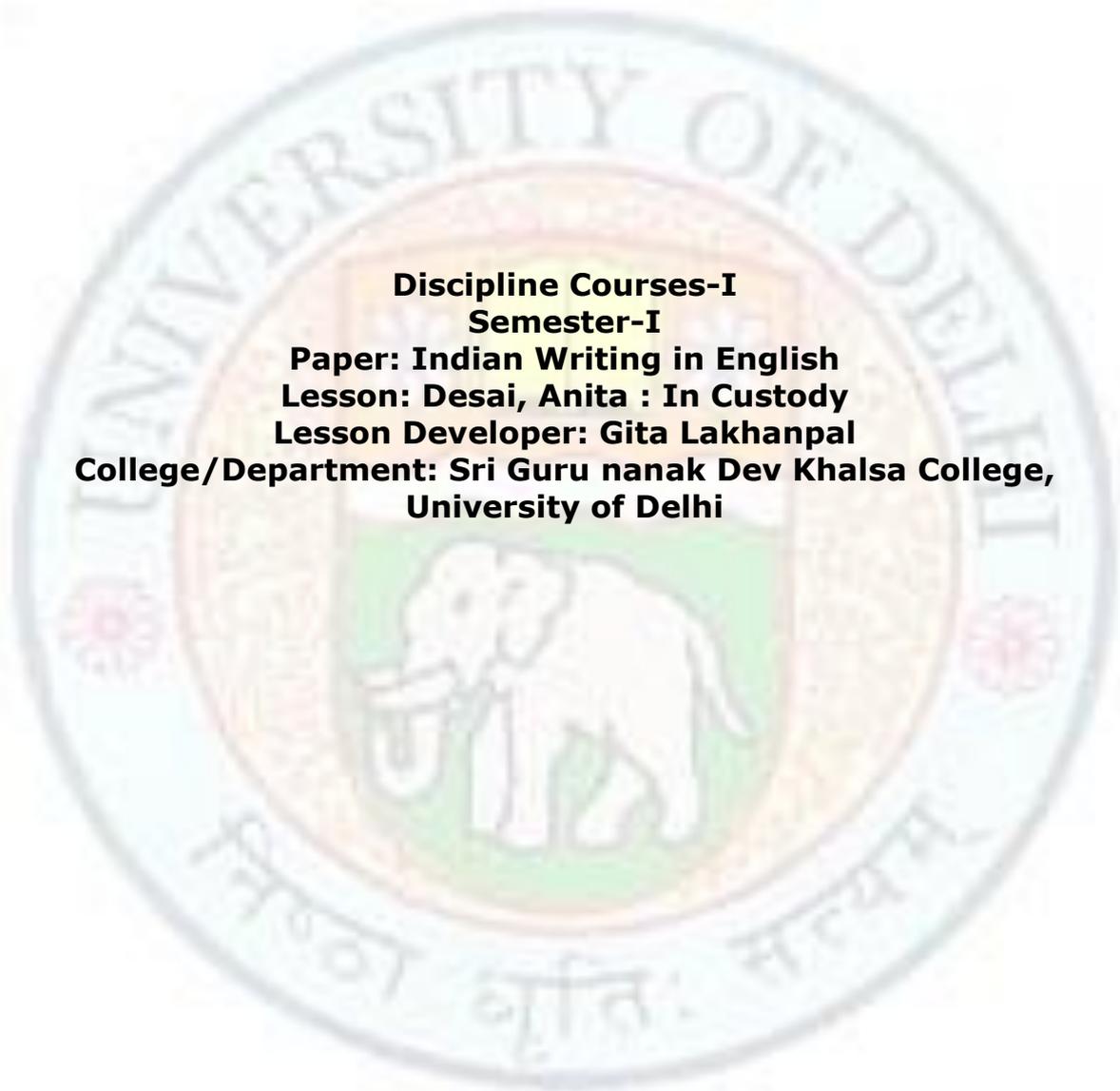


**Desai, Anita : In Custody**



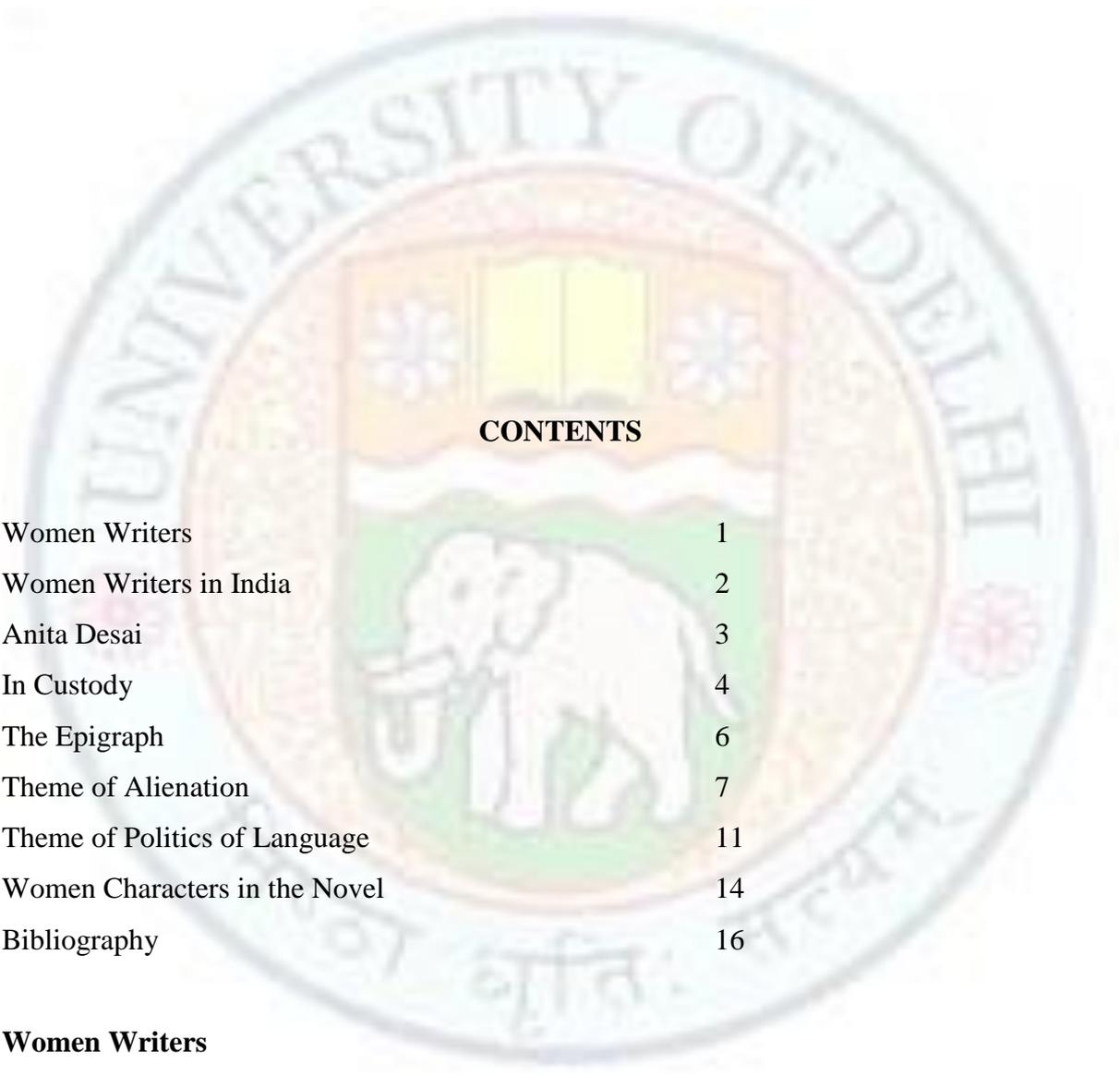
**Discipline Courses-I  
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The logo of the University of Delhi is a circular emblem. It features a central shield with a yellow open book at the top, flanked by two white floral motifs. Below the book is a green field with a white elephant. The shield is set against a background of orange and green. The words 'UNIVERSITY OF DELHI' are written in a circular path around the top of the emblem, and 'विश्वविद्यालय दिल्ली' is written in Hindi at the bottom. The word 'सत्यम्' (Satyam) is also visible at the bottom.

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**Women Writers**

Literature for a very long time was considered to be a male domain, written by men, for men and about men. It was certainly a herculean task for women writers to put the pen to paper, for they were told that a “needle suits her fingers better than a pen”. In a patriarchal society, women writers faced numerous hurdles because of feminine stereotypes. They were not supposed to be seen or heard in the public domain and writing and publishing placed them amongst the reading audience. In the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Centuries women writers

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across the world fought a battle with herself, trying to suppress her creative urge. In the absence of any role model they suffered guilt when they experienced the desire to express themselves in creative work. Not only was their act of writing criticised but even their content and themes were dismissed as unworthy of serious consideration. Even the publishers were not ready to publish a work by a woman writer for fear of lack of readership.

Gradually women writers developed strategies to gain acceptability in the literary domain. They often projected a low profile of themselves by claiming they were writing for friends and relatives only and that their writings were not equal to the male writers' grandeur neither in theme nor in technique. Women writers had to grapple with concerns such as what to write and how to write. Should they emulate their male counterparts in their portrayal of women and writing style or should they create characters and styles of their own. Progressively they evolved writing strategies to express their real concerns by writing them slant, putting them in between the lines or putting words in the not so popular character's mouth.

Women took to writing against all odds because writing for them was a release mechanism for their pent up emotions. Since society had prescribed silence to them writing was one way of expressing themselves, defying patriarchal constraints, asserting their freedom and negotiating for space of their own. Writing is a tool in the hands of the marginalised group to pave their way towards the centre.

### **Women Writers in India**

In post-independent India writers primarily concentrated on themes of violence, subaltern existence, rural urban divide and identity crisis caused by the partition of the Indian sub-continent. Some women writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906-1988), Nayantara Sahgal (1927), Kamla Markanday (1924-2004), Ruth Jhabvala (1927-2013), Shashi Deshpande (1938), and Anita Desai (1937) have primarily concentrated on feminist concerns such as, identity crisis, self-realisation and alienation but within the larger framework of the socio-political history of the country. Nayantara Sahgal's women characters are seen negotiating for their space and voice in their patriarchal homes. With her connection to the Nehru family it is not surprising that she writes about the impact of historical and political turmoil on the lives of people. Kamla Markanday's women belong to the subaltern class of rural India. They are seen to defend their identity and strength of mind while not openly revolting against the setup. She too weaves historical incidents, such as Quit India Movement, into her novels. Being an expatriate writer the consequences of east-west cultural clash is an obvious theme in her works. Ruth Jhabvala "can be said to have dealt with distortion of modernity and

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women's liberation. Her women do not go against traditions out of any firm conviction; they do so in order to pose modern" (Shubha Tiwari, *Women's Liberation Movement and Indian Women Novelists*, R. K. Dhawan, ed., "Indian Women Writers", New Delhi: Prestige Books, pg. 20). Shashi Deshpande "teaches women to fight the silence and express themselves. Deshpande is not unconcerned about Indian reality in respect of the lot of women, but she is not a strident and militant kind of feminist who sees the male as the sole cause of all her problems. . . . Deshpande does not offer readymade solutions, for she believes, in literary writing "one does not pose a problem and present a solution. It's not maths. The value based fabric of life that she projects are of great significance." (Deshpande Shashi , *Literature and Gender*, Directorate of Distance Education pg.171). Over a period of time themes have changed from that of silence, identity, passive resistance to that of aggressive assertion of self and voice. Writers like Shobhaa De (1948), Arunditi Roy ( 1961) and Kiran Desai (1971) have made politics, social restlessness and cultural change their themes.

### Anita Desai: The Writer



Anita Mazumdar Desai was born in 1937 in Mussoorie. Her father was Bengali and mother German. She did her schooling from Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School, Delhi and college from Miranda House, Delhi. She grew up speaking English, German, Hindi and Urdu and in her childhood she was also exposed to Western literature and Eastern culture. This ability to speak eastern and western languages and exposure to their literature and culture has stood Anita Desai in good stead as a writer. At the age of twenty one she got married to a businessman and got busy

in raising a family.

Her first novel *Cry the Peacock* was published in England in the year 1963. She decided to publish abroad probably because women writers in India were not taken seriously by the publishers then. Writing in English language came naturally to her, "I can state definitely that I did not choose English in a deliberate and conscious act and I'd say perhaps it was the

"My style of writing is to allow the story to unfold on its own. I try not to structure my work too rigidly. I don't make outlines for my novels. Instead, I jot down notes, then formulate characters. I try to trace the connection between the characters and that way a story or plot emerges."

([www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/s/writer\\_in\\_residence/desaiinterview.htm](http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/s/writer_in_residence/desaiinterview.htm)).

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language that chose me”(Anita Desai, “The Indian Writer’s Problems” *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, ed. Ramesh K Srivastava, Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984, pg. 1-4). Her novel *Fire on the Mountain* won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 and her novel *In Custody*

When Anita Desai was asked how she felt when readers read her works differently she replied, “I believe that once a writer creates a novel, it takes on a life of its own. I feel dissociated from a book in the bookstore \_ it belongs to the reader”(www.baruch.cuny.edu/academics/writer\_in\_residence/desaiinterview.htm).

was nominated for Booker Prize. Two other novels of Anita Desai were shortlisted for Booker Prize, *Clear Light of Day* and *Fasting and Feasting*. She has also won the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize for her work *Village by the sea*. Her latest novel is *The Artist of Disappearance*, 2011.

Anita Desai in her early novels like *Cry the Peacock* and *Where Shall we go This Summer* has focused on women

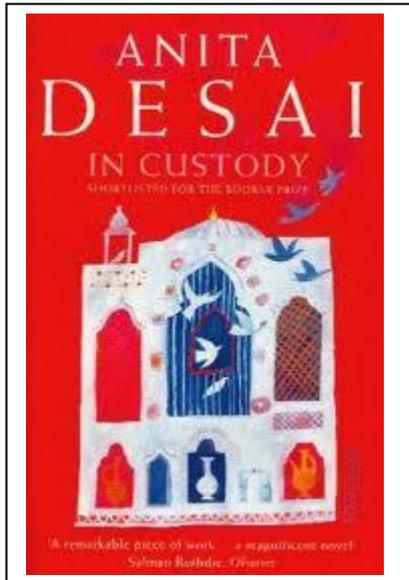
protagonists psychological alienation of middle class women. Anita Desai generally focuses on a specific stage in her protagonist life and one doesn’t see the evolution of character. Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* suffers from father fixation. She wants love and companionship from her husband Gautam, while he preaches detachment to her. Sita in *Where Shall we go This Summer* cannot cope with violence all around so she withdraws to an island believing that in the magical island she can achieve the miracle of keeping her child unborn. Lack of compatibility between Sita and Raman forces her to take this step. Even though she is considered to be a diaspora writer writing for international audience she delves deep into Indian women’s mind and portrays their struggle and conflict for freedom and identity very realistically. Anita Desai’s early novels dealt with the psychological lives of women but she did not like been called a feminist writer because it would limit her scope as a writer. It is true that in her later novels she has moved on to write about other issues.

In *Clear Light of Day* and *Baumgartner’s Bombay* she moved towards other themes such as post partition tensions and pain of war and exile respectively. Her novel *The Zigzag Way* is set in Mexico and when the writer was asked how is it that she has moved away from India she said that she left India when she was forty five and she is not too familiar with the modern India that is emerging.

### In Custody

**“I’ve tried to break away completely from the writing I was doing earlier on. It’s been a very conscious and deliberate effort to do something in an entirely different vein. Like a**

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coal miner, I felt I had exhausted one seam . . . .(An Interview, *Imprint*, June 1984, pg. 58.)

In the novel *In Custody* (1984) Nur Shahjehanabadi, a great Urdu poet is seen living in a dark house in a dirty Chandni Chowk alley. He does not have sufficient means to sustain his family. His problems are further aggravated by his 'great poet' image. People from the neighbourhood crowd his room in the guise of listening and reciting poetry but are actually attracted by the free flow of liquor and food. They visit the poet not out of respect for him but to showcase their

own Bollywood style poetry. This is true not only of visitors but also of Nur's second wife, Intiaz Begum, who has established her control and presence in the house so as to benefit from Nur's image and influence. On her birthday she organises a kavi darbar and takes centre stage with Nur in the audience. Nur's dependence on his wives is evident from the way he is manipulated by them. He is in awe of his second wife and cannot think of recording his

It was not that I was consciously following that thread of history. But this was my world. It was the world of Old Delhi, in those pre-Independence days, when one was really very much aware of Muslim culture having made Old Delhi, just the way the British made New Delhi, and they are two very different worlds actually. The world I grew up in was that of Old Delhi in which one still heard Urdu poetry being recited. When I went to school, half of the population there was studying Urdu, the other half Hindi. So I was very aware of that historical, multi-cultural world. In that sense, in 1947, with Independence and Partition, we had the most traumatic moment in Indian history, for my generation certainly. That was when it was all coming apart. So perhaps, again, in a very subconscious way, it was an effort to put them together again, these broken pieces, to hold them together again. ("Conversation avec Anita Desai", *Romanière Indienne* lundi 1er juin 2009 Jean S. Sahai)

poetry while she is unwell for fear of disturbing her. His submissive behaviour towards his wife reveals his servile existence in his household. His first wife, Safia Begum offers to help Deven record Nur's poetry but demands a price for the same. He is smuggled out of his own house to a nearby room to enable him to record his memoirs.

Deven, a Hindi teacher in Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore, becomes the custodian of Nur's poetry when his friend, Murad approaches him to interview Nur for his Urdu magazine *Awaz*. Deven's love for Urdu poetry makes him accept this assignment and it takes him to Delhi. He is disappointed to see the great poet in disrespect and finds himself entangled in his affairs. In his enthusiasm to serve Urdu learning, University of Delhi

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poetry he accepts the task of recording the memoirs of Nur that proves to be beyond his competence. He fails miserably in his attempt and finds himself answerable to his friend Murad for delaying the printing of his magazine and the college authorities for the funds that were allocated to him for the specific purpose of recording Urdu poetry for the Urdu Department. He naively walks into a trap and finds himself in custody of his role of being the custodian of Nur's poetry. "He had launched himself, and then, upon a course it now seemed impossible to stop"(235). Deven is haunted by letters from Nur and his family expecting and demanding of him to meet their expenses. Unable to make his own two ends meet Deven is dumbfounded by this development. On all fronts he fails to deliver, he cannot impress his seniors in college and neither is he able to win students' respect. Along with his failure to record Nur's memoirs and poetry he fails to come up to the expectations of his wife. "All he knew was that he who had set out to hunt Nur down was being hunted down himself, the prey" (161). At home his wife Sarla is perplexed by his visits to Delhi and Deven is caught in an inept relationship. "Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments"(70).

Even though Anita Desai has not created fictional regions like Thomas Hardy's 'Wessex' and R.K. Narayan's 'Malgudi' she gives detailed description of the locale in which she places her characters. Environment has a crucial role to play in the lives of her characters. They grapple with the dreariness of the physical world and in doing so reveal their own self. She is acutely sensitive to the interaction between man and his surroundings (R.S. Sharma, *Anita Desai*). Anita Desai has located the story in Mirpore. "The bus soon left Mirpore behind. It came as a slight shock to Deven that one could so quickly and easily free oneself from what had come to seem to him not only the entire world since he had no existence outside it, but often a cruel trap, or prison as well, an indestructible prison from which there was no escape"(12).

She has given the town a perspective through the description of a mosque that was built by a Nawab as thanks giving to God for his safe escape from the 1857 mutiny. She has also given a Hindu presence to the town by mentioning that the history of the temples could not be recalled. The writer often uses vivid descriptions of the physical environment to prepare for and suggest the mood of the forthcoming events yet to unfold. "it's white marble facings had turned grey and pork-marked through urban pollution, the black marble inlay had either fallen or been picked out by sharp instruments held in idle hands, the red sandstone of the dome had

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turned to the colour of filth from the smoke of open fires, the excreta of pigeons, and the ubiquitous dust of Mirpore”(13). The decay of the mosque is suggestive of the fate of Urdu language. Anita Desai all through the novel has used metaphors to suggest that Urdu is losing its popularity. The division of the town into Muslim area and Hindu area builds the environment for the language strife to unfold. First the description of Mr. Siddique, Urdu teacher’s, dilapidated house and his hospitality and later his action of selling the property to a builder is also a trope used by the author to suggest the end of Urdu language and the culture associated with it. Anita Desai very deftly uses the detailed descriptions of the streets of Mirpore, Chandni Chowk alleys, road leading to Delhi and the lack lustre buildings to suggest the alienated existence of her characters and creates the environment that is fraught with difficulties and disappointments.

### The Epigraph

‘ . . . they should take who have the power

And they should keep who can.’

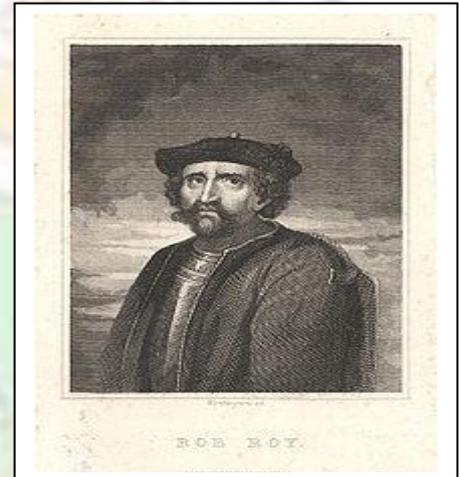
Rob Roy’s Grave By William Wordsworth

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rob\\_Roy\\_MacGregor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rob_Roy_MacGregor):

About Rob Roy, the legendary character.

<http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww242.html> : The poem

Rob Roy’s Grave by William Wordsworth



Rob Roy, an outlaw earned a place for himself in Scotland as Robin Hood had in the forest of Sherwood, as saviour of the weak and poor. The legendry hero has nothing in common with the characters of Nur and Deven, who on the contrary lack control over their lives, but the lines quoted in the epigraph are suggestive of the essence of the novel \_ relationships are two way processes. Commitment and responsibility has to be endured in the long term and cannot be limited in time or purpose.

### Theme of Alienation

Two significant themes that emerge in the novel are those of alienation and language politics. Anita Desai in most of her novels has dealt with the theme of alienation. In her early novels like *Cry the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain* and *Where Shall we go This Summer* she focused

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on psychological alienation of middle-class women within the family confines. In a later novel, *Voices in the City* she has concentrated on cultural alienation and in *In Custody* it is alienation from self. Anita Desai has repeatedly delved into the theme of alienation because she believes that man is constantly engaged in negotiating between the harsh realities of the world and one's own responsibilities and desires. Acute sense of alienation is experienced when man finds oneself all alone juggling with his circumstances to keep his passion and dream alive. Insensibilities of people around to one's cause and circumstances in one's life force man to set out on the path of self-discovery. Many of her heroines have suffered the fate of being declared mad because they resisted the role and life defined for them by patriarchy.

“The existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and that there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero. What counts is the total commitment, and it is not by a particular case or particular action that you are committed altogether”( Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings, Routledge, Pg 37).

“Without denying the rights of persons and subjects, Hegel asserts against liberal orthodoxy the vital necessity for modern humanity of concrete social situatedness and integration. He reminds us that without this, the formal freedom to make arbitrary choices and express our subjectivity leads in the direction of alienation rather than self-actualisation. He stresses the point that we cannot be free unless our social self is self-transparent. We must be able to gain rational insight into it, and live consciously in the light of self-awareness.”(Hegel: Elements of the Philosophy of Right , By Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel, Cambridge UP, pg xxix)

Hegel's concept of alienation involves lack of control over all that is happening around and become mere spectators and passive beings. According to Hegel to be a subject and not object one has to have the ability to achieve one's goals and aspirations. Whereas, Marx associates alienation to mode of production, what man produces and means of production. For Marx alienation is caused “First that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature, and that; consequently, he does not fulfil himself in his work. But denies himself; has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased.”(Marx and Engles, *Historisch-Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt; Marx-Engles Institut, 1927-1935, vol, 1, pg, 85).

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Nur's alienation can be attributed to fall of Urdu Poetry from grace in post-independent India. Changing post partition politics has changed the status of Urdu language and thereby of all those who practice and cherish the language. "How can there be Urdu poetry when there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished. The defeat of the Moghuls by the British threw a noose over its head, and the defeat of the British by the Hindiwallahs tightened it. So now you see its corpse lying there, waiting to be buried"(Pg. 39). Poet Nur experiences acute disconnect with the changing times. The Urdu muse has deserted him, he "cannot fulfil himself in his work" and economically too he fails to provide for his family.

Image of Old Chandini Chowk with Trams



After independence what followed suit was the era of commercialisation so the demand of the time was no longer for motivational poetry. The position of art and the artist was compromised. Murad approached Deven to interview Nur more for the commercial benefit of his magazine rather than for the love of poetry or poet. The magazine 'Awaz' which proposes to devote a full volume to great Urdu writers functions from a make

shift shamble and is struggling for its very own survival. Murad's idea of approaching Nur is a desperate attempt to save his magazine but pretends it is love of Urdu language. "Only your hobby' mocked Murad. 'can you serve a language by taking it up "only as your hobby"? doesn't it deserve more? Doesn't it deserve a lifetime dedication – like mine?' he demanded" (9). Deven



enchanted by Urdu poetry and Nur leaps at the opportunity of interviewing Nur and sets out for Delhi. He finds the great Urdu poet Nur living a life of poverty in a dark dilapidated building in a tight Chandni Chowk alley. "Stepping over a flowing gutter, shoving aside a great humped bull that was quietly munching paper bags from an open dustbin that lay on its side, spilling its contents across the gutter so that it was blocked and begun to flood, he

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turned the corner into another lane. On one side of it stretched the high wall of a gloomy green hospital and along the other was a row of small tightly shut wooden doors set into straight, faded walls” (34). Neither was this a befitting abode for the great poet Nur nor for his poetic muse to inspire. Chandni Chowk, a commercial hub of Delhi, eclipses the once upon a time seat of poetry and culture. In Nur’s poetic durbar audience were attracted by the free supply of food and drinks, and some by the opportunity they get to recite their own mediocre poetry. “I am surrounded by fools. Fools will follow me, pursue me and find me out and capture me so that in the end I myself will join their company”” (35). Even his second wife, Imtiaz Begum uses him as a stepping stone to emerge as a poet herself. Not only does she organise a kavi durbar on her birthday and takes the centre stage with Nur in the audience, she even sends her poetic work to Deven to judge and dares him, “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 that your superiority to women may become questionable” (224). Nur’s state of complete dependence is portrayed in his inability to even control his body movements and his incapacity to write poetry himself. He neither has the permission nor does he have uninterrupted time to himself to be able to record his memories and poetry in his own house, “Don’t speak like that, we will be heard. I am forbidden. You don’t understand. She is right – absolutely right – I only make a fool of myself –an old man, my day is over – and people laugh, or feel bored, they want someone new, and young you see –” (128). He has to stealthily slip out and go to a rented room to record his poems and memoirs.



Deven, as per Hegel’s concept of alienation, suffers because he is not in control of all that goes around him. He is a passive sufferer. Brought up by a widowed mother he could be bribed to do anything by his rich friends like Murad. He was told he had inherited his love for poetry from his father. Unfortunately the great lover of Urdu poetry, Deven is forced to teach Hindi in a small town college. Since Urdu after independence is no longer popular with people he is forced to change his language to be able to sustain his family. Even Hindi

language is not very popular with the



ng, University of Delhi

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students for they pursue other vocational courses after college. Deven as a teacher is not very successful as he fails to capture students' attention, "The expression he saw - of boredom, amusement, insolence and defiance – made him look away quickly and focus his upon the door at the far end of the room, the door that opened on to the passage, freedom and release"(5).

Joachim Isarel states that for Marx work is creative if "man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness, if work can express his capability, if through his work he can express his social nature and if work is not merely sustenance to him (J. Israel, *Alienation: from Marx to Modern Sociology*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon,1971, pg. 39). It is his love for the language and his particular interest in the Urdu poet Nur that makes him accept the assignment of interviewing Nur for a journal his friend takes out in Urdu language. "It was to him 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 diety. . . . In his mortal myopia and stupidity, he had expected it[summons] to come from Sarla when he married her, or from the head of the department at his college who alone could promote and demote and alter his position in life, or even from Murad who after all lived in the metropolis and edited a magazine (36). His involvement in this job further strains his relationship with his wife and even threatens his position in college. Deven's alienation is seen in his inability to plan, execute and control the work in hand. Deven is called by Nur's elder wife, Safia Begum and she offers her assistance to help him record Nur's poetry, but for a price. Once again Deven finds himself knocking at Mr. Siddiqui's doors asking for help in getting more funds for the recording. This experience makes Deven wonder how he "had been brought to his knees, abject and babbling in his helplessness. How?" (159).

"How did others control their lives, manage and organise and arrange and even succeed?" (159) whereas he is dependent on others to help him even with ordinary day to day issues like procuring a tape recorder or seeking grants from college. "There was only he[recording assistant], totally inadequate, incompetent and unconfident. But now it was too late to withdraw. He would have to stretch himself as he had never stretched before, reach for something he had not been trained to reach nor was qualified to reach, and use whatever capacity he had to the fullest in order to achieve something worthy of his hero. But what were his capacities?" (126).

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Theme of alienation is also brought out through the image of cage and the feeling of being trapped, “ And that was all he was – a trapped animal. In his youth, he had had the illusion of having a free will, not knowing he was in a trap. Marriage, a family and a job had placed him in his cage; now there was no way out of it” (146).

Dr. Sharda Iyer in her article “Anita Desai’s *In Custody* : Deven’s Agony and Ecstasy” says Deven understands that art transcends society and social reality “to project the realm of future possibility”. Art liberates and should not be expected to solve problems. Towards the end of the novel Deven overcomes his alienation when he realises that, “He had accepted the gift of Nur’s poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur’s very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure. . . . he ran, stopping only to pull a branch of thorns from under his feet”(233).

Both the epigraph and the conclusion of the novel suggest the need “to recognise that every true kinship is essentially a two way commitment, an act of continued responsibility for the other. . . one does not abandon what one has made use of.” (Ramesh Kumar Gupta, pg. 133). Both Nur and Deven are alienated from society and their families because of the divide between the love of their heart and the harsh realities of life. They want to serve Urdu poetry but economic realities of life and family controls supersede their creative and literary desires.

### Theme of Politics of Language

India is a country of diverse languages and cultures. Each language has its literature and identity but the politics of language has got entangled in the socio political scene of the country after partition. Regional languages resist the imposition of Hindi and fight for the supremacy of their regional language. However the tension between Hindi and Urdu has a peculiar relationship of oneness and difference. “Hindi-Urdu are not two separate languages; they are basically one and the same. Their pronouns, verbs and basic vocabulary are the same. There are no two other languages in the world whose pronouns and verbs are one hundred percent the same” (Ram Bilas Sharma, *Bharat ki Bhasha Samasya*, New Delhi 1978, p. 288). “It is absolutely clear that Urdu and Hindi are not two separate languages. To call them two languages is to belie all principles of linguistics and to deceive oneself and others. . . . Even though Urdu literature and Hindi literature are two different and independent literatures, Urdu and Hindi are not two different languages” (Gyan Chand, *Úrdu Hindi ya Hindustani*, *Hindustani Zuban*, Jan-April 1974).

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But it has also been said that, “the Hindoostanee or Oordoo differs essentially from the Hindee or Hindooee, the former derived principally from the Arabic or Persian, and the latter from the Sanskrit. The inflections of both being the same, and the strange admixture of them that frequently obtains, where both are spoken in the same city, have led to the erroneous conclusion that they are the same language: whereas the Oordoo is peculiar in its application to the Moosulman population in every part of India, while the Hindooee applies only to the Hindoos in the Upper Provinces” (W. Yates, ‘Preface’, *Introduction to the Hindustanee Language*, Calcutta, 1827). “The power of language as icon must never be underestimated. Like it or not, the Urdu script means Muslim, the Devanagari script means Hindu” (R. King, 1988, pg. 84). According to Aijaz Ahmed three things are responsible for the decay of Urdu language. One partition, two linkage of Urdu as the lingua franca of Muslims and thirdly discarding Hindustani in favour of Hindi (Ahmed, 1996).

The above quotations clearly bring out the sameness and difference in the perception of Hindi and Urdu and how these languages parted ways under the influence Mughal rule and British policy of Divide and rule.

*In Custody* has primarily been read as dealing with the politics of language. It engages with the question of language’s association with religion and nation. The novel portrays the tension between Urdu and Hindi language. In Post- independent India Anita Desai is suggesting that, Urdu has very little relevance. “I was trying to portray the world of Urdu poets. Living in Delhi I was always surrounded by the sound of Urdu poetry, which is mostly recited. Nobody reads it, but one goes to recitations. It was very much the voice of North India. 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 .....There are many Muslims and they do write in Urdu; but it has a kind of very artificial existence. People are not going to study Urdu in school and college anymore, so who are going to be their readers? Where is the audience?”

Two characters associated with the language, Nur and Mr. Siddiqui cannot restore Urdu to its glorious status, ““We need the roar of lions, or the boom of cannon, so that we can march upon these Hindiwallas and make them run. Let them see the power of Urdu,’ he thundered. ‘They think it is chained and tamed in the dusty yards of those cemeteries that they call

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universities, but can't we show them that it can still let out a roar or a bomb?" (52). Urdu as a literary language and as the language of common man is losing relevance and acceptance. Hindi is perceived as dethroning Urdu, "Have you heard Sri Gobind's latest poem cycle?" he bawled. "They are saying in the bazaar that it will win the Sahitya Akademi award for Hindi this year. For Urdu we can of course expect the same verdict as usual: "No book was judged worthy of the award this year" (55).

Nur, the Urdu poet is fast losing the battle of his life and creativity and Mr. Siddiqui's decision to sell his house to the builder indicates his acceptance that to survive one has to adapt to the new ways of life and cannot continue to cling to the glorious past. Even the custodian, Deven, who is appointed to ensure Nur's poetry is preserved and passed on to the next generation fails miserably in his attempt to record Nur's poetry. The tension between Hindi and Urdu is abundantly brought out in the novel. Nur questions Deven why has he chosen to become a Hindi teacher if he is passionate about Urdu poetry? "Those Congresswallahs have set up Hindi on top as our ruler. You are its slave. Perhaps a spy even if you don't know it, sent to the universities to destroy whatever remains of Urdu, hunt it out and kill it. And you tell me it is for an Urdu magazine you wish to interview me. If so, why are you teaching Hindi?" (40)

Mr. Tiwari's outburst, when Deven asks for one week leave just before the commencement of holidays, portrays the animosity Hindi lovers have for Urdu language, "I'll have you demoted, Sharma –I'll see to it you don't get your confirmation. 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. I'll complain to the Principal, I'll warn the RSS, you are a traitor" (163).

Amina Yaqin in the article "Communalism and Disintegration writes that, "Desai is analyzing Urdu as the cultural object of a lived experience in post-Partition India"(The Annual of Urdu Studies pg. 122). Valorising the past and looking back with nostalgia is a significant post-colonial theme and Anita Desai too is alluding to the glorious past of Urdu language when Urdu enjoyed the status of the cultured language, the language of the aristocrats. It is also suggestive of the communal tension created by the history of partition. However, a conclusion can be drawn that in reality politics of language plays a very limited role in the lives of common man because Murad comes to Deven, a Hindu to help him save

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Urdu legacy. Nur is impressed by the purity of Deven's Urdu pronunciation and knowledge of his poems. Deven in college turns to Mr. Siddique for assistance when he is in need of finances for the tape recorder. In the day to day transactions people are unaware of any tension between the two languages and cultures but when politics of language is foregrounded the animosity is all too evident.

Other than the communal tension commercialisation is also responsible for Urdu language in particular and other regional languages losing respect and popularity in society. *In Custody* Nur is living in Chandni Chowk, the once cultural hub of Delhi is now a busy commercial centre. This positioning of the great Urdu poet problematizes the survival of language and literature in a commercial world. Murad decides to bring out a special issue on Nur's poetry to regain popularity for his magazine *Awaz*. The magazine is brought out of a cramped dilapidated office, this suggests the struggle a literary magazine has to undergo to keep itself afloat. Murad approaches Deven to interview Nur because he can get work out of his college days friend without having to pay him. In the past too Deven had sent his poems to Murad to publish in his magazine but was never paid for them. Murad reprimands Deven that he cannot serve a language as a hobby, it demands dedication. Murad's sole objective is commercial in nature, to ensure the survival of his magazine.

Deven gets money sanctioned from college to record Nur's poetry for the Urdu Department but this money is inadequate to buy appropriate recording equipment and pay for a skilled assistant. As a consequence of which the entire exercise of recording Nur's poems and the expenses incurred in the process prove to be futile. Safia Begum's involvement in assisting Deven to interview and record Nur's memoirs is also in exchange for monetary benefits. In the commercial world languages are struggling to survive. Teachers and students of language are both disturbed by the lack of avenues in the perusal of language. Mr. Tiwari and Deven struggle to sustain their families but their friend in America is thriving because he is in the science field. Deven's own students of Hindi language are simultaneously pursuing computer courses after college to equip themselves with technical skills which is valued in the commercial world.

It is true that in Anita Desai's novels characters are more powerful and central to the novel than the theme and locale. However, in this novel the language politics and Mirpore are as significant and central to the text as Nur and Deven. The tension between Urdu and Hindi language continues to persist in the mind as the reader stumbles through the lanes of Chandni Chowk with Deven.

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### Women Characters in the Novel

Sarla, Safia Begum and Imtiaz Begum are three women characters delineated in the novel. Though the writer had set out to write a novel depicting the male world and their view point she has successfully portrayed women's suppressed desires both, literary and familial. The three women characters in the novel are all different with different expectations from life. Even though their characters have not been defined in great detail each one of them is posed and positioned differently. Safia Begum is seen in the periphery of Nur's household, non-interfering, confining herself to women's quarters and domesticity. Sarla too moves within the stereotypical role of women but glimpses of assertion of one's self and desire is perceived in this character. Imtiaz Begum is portrayed as an ambitious woman, prepared to fight for her position in Nur's life, home and for her recognition as a poet.

"I found some of the women like the young Begum in the book, Imtiaz Begum, being extremely shrill whenever I gave her a voice; she sounded so shrill, like a harridan, and I did not like her very much myself. And I wondered: why am I creating such an unpleasant character if I want to create sympathy for women? Why am I not making them sympathetic? 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." (Jean S. Sahai Conversation avec Anita Desai, Romancière Indienne lundi 1er juin 2009). The prostitute tag attached to Imtiaz Begum's name prods her to seek acceptance in the world of 'respectable' people. She tries to control Nur's life because she has deep seated insecurities and Nur is her only security in life. She manipulates Nur to the extent of insulting and controlling him probably because she wants him to hold her in awe and he does, "I recite the story of my life here, in this house, when she is so ill in her room, there? He pointed through the door to the room across the courtyard. 'She would hear this \_ it would disturb her \_and then you know, she does not like me to recite anymore.'"(127).

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“you don’t understand. She is right \_ absolutely right \_ I only make a fool of myself \_ an old man, my day is over \_ and people laugh, or feel bored, they want someone new, and young, you see \_”(128).

She wants Deven to respect her, if only out of respect for the great poet Nur. He must have recognised her intellectual capabilities to have married her, so any disrespect shown to her would be an insult of the great poet’s intellect. She tries to rise above her situation and carve a niche for herself in the literary world. On one hand she pleads her case, “I am a woman and have no education but what I have found and seized for myself. Unlike poets and scholars who have won distinctions, I have had no patron apart from my honoured husband, no encouragement and no sympathy” (223) and on the other challenges Deven to accept the merit of a woman poet, “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” (224). Imtiaz Begum’s desire to be heard as a poet is forfeited when Deven walks out of the Kavi Darbar when she is reciting her poetry and also in his casting aside of her manuscript.

Anita Desai in the novel has also touched upon the theme of relationship between husband and wife. Deven’s incompetence is accentuated by his inability to keep his family happy. Sarla is a discontented wife, who finds it difficult to reach out to her husband and to even understand the purpose of his visits to Delhi. “A victim does not look to help from another victim, he looks for a redeemer. At least Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look” (70). Lack of communication between husband and wife, “‘I did write’, she snapped, and pointed at an unopened letter that lay on the small table next to his chair” (220) completes their estrangement. They are both victims of patriarchal stereotypes. Sarla has dreams, typical of middle class, of upward mobility through marriage- she desired fan, phone and refrigerator, but when her husband, a Hindi teacher in a College in Mirpore, does not measure up to her expectations she is disillusioned and disappointed with her relationship with her husband. Deven wanted to hug Sarla and say he shared her worries and pain but that would “have permanently undermined his position of power over her, a position that was as important to her as to him: if she ceased to believe in it, what would there be for her to do, where would she go?” (221).

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Alter ego of Sarla is Imtiaz Begum. Sarla is seen to be silently suffering her disappointment and expressing her resentment in her silence but Imtiaz Begum is seen shouting and raving not only at Nur but all around him, “ Did he marry me to make me live in pigsty with him? Am I to live like a pig with all the rest of you?” (60). Imtiaz’s frustration with her life is similar to Sarla’s disillusionment with her marriage. Both the women fail to realise the dream of their life through their husbands.

Anita Desai’s novel attracted much criticism and critical acclaim and this led to the making of a movie based on the novel. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZDbagGC7k8> : Movie *In Custody*

### Summary

The lesson attempts to familiarise students with the difficulties faced by women writers and place Anita Desai amidst other women writers of her time. Anita Desai’s progress as a writer and her changing themes and locales have been traced. Writers preoccupation with the theme of alienation and her movement from writing about women’s psychological alienation to other themes like post partition, war and exile is outlined. In the novel *In Custody* Anita Desai has delineated a philosophical idea that in a relationship one cannot set limits or shirk taking responsibilities, relationships are two way processes. Deven and Nur experience alienation because they are unable to establish meaningful relations at home or in their professional environment. Through the characters of Nur and Deven the writer has also focused on the politics of language between Urdu and Hindi.

### Glossary

**Alienation** : is the feeling of dissatisfaction. It is one’s inability to connect with others around or with the society in which one lives. Incapable of finding relevance in the world around or the work at hand leads to the feeling of alienation. Soren Kierkegaard saw alienation as separation from God. Martin Heidegger relates the feeling of alienation to the temporality of life and man’s desire to place himself in the world. According to Sartre trying to get knowledge of the other leads to the experience of alienation. Psychoanalysis roots alienation in the conflict between conscious and the unconscious mind. For Marx alienation is due to material condition of the working class, neither does the worker identify himself with the product produced nor does he have any control over the product.

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**Feminism:** is the movement for women's rights for equal status, right to education etc.

**Feminist Writers:** in their works protagonists are women characters and themes deal with women's lives, aspirations, frustrations and psychology.

**Patriarchy:** is male rule and control over society, resources and relationships personal and social.

**Quit India Movement:** Gandhi ji in August 1942 said that British rule in India must come to an end. To achieve this goal he gave a call of 'do or die'. The struggle for independence was to be non-violent in nature.

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