

Gender polemics essay



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In Custody are presented as oppressed by the males, thus they are in this sense, a parallel to the colonized because both women and the colonized experience oppression and struggle with breaking free from the control of men and colonizers respectively. They are bound by the identity that their oppressors impose on them, one that is generalised and that entraps them. However, Desai also develops the women in In Custody as characters who assert control over the males in the novel in such a way that they are the ones who emerge as the wielders of power instead of the males.

Though women are peripheral in the novel, they are able to subtly demonstrate their authority over men and the immense strength of their character. Women are presented as inferior to men in Anita Desai's In Custody. In the novel, Desai does not give women much attention and focuses the story mostly on the men in the novel instead. Also, the men flippantly degrade women as objects of pleasure and make use of women for their own desires and satisfaction. Desai presents women as the oppressed and not being able to have the freedom to do as they like as the men in the novel do.

Deven constantly looks down on the women in the novel. He puts down Imtiaz Begum's capabilities, subjugating her to a level of lower authority and describes her voice to be "as plain as her appearance" (87). Furthermore, Sarla's aspirations as a female and as a bride were overlooked because it is something "so abstract" (67) that women are not expected to dream of them at all. Women are seen to be made use of in the way the men in the novel call for them when they are in need of entertainment or companionship.

Deven realised that if he “ had someone”, then-. Thus women are presented as peripheral in this sense and are unable to go against the men because they are bound to the men in the novel by traditions. At the onset, women are presented in *In Custody* as inferior to men. Yet as the novel progresses, Desai develops the character of women in such a way that they overpower man in seemingly small but powerful ways and bring about a role reversal in which women play the dominator over men.

In addition, Desai not only strengthens the character of the women but weakens the character of the men in the novel as well to show the stark contrast in power dynamics between the men and women. Desai expertly portrays the main men in *In Custody*, Deven and Nur, as useless men who are insecure yet live in self-denial and delude themselves into thinking that they are wise and working for the greater good. In the novel, the female characters are not given many appearances, but despite that, Desai elevates them to significant standing and even portrays them as omnipresent.

The characters of Sarla, Safiya and Imtiaz Begum clearly demonstrate the power they have over males and their intentions to overthrow the stereotypes of women as weak and insignificant. Sarla holds the authority at home and over Manu, being able to command Manu to “ go fetch (his) books” (69), something that Deven is unable to achieve, because he only receives silence from Manu. Likewise with Imtiaz Begum, she is perceived to be superior to Deven and Nur through her use of imperatives towards them.

As she screams at them, she reduces Nur to a state in which he is “ huddled, whimpering, on the mattress, holding his knees to his chest” (58) as though

he is afraid of her. She also “commanded” Deven to “go fetch water” and “wash the floor” (59) as though he is her servant. Desai presents women as seemingly colonised in *In Custody*, by not giving them as much attention as what is given to the males in the novel, therefore implying that they are insignificant and peripheral, as well as the fact that the story centres mostly on Deven, who is male and who represents the colonizers.

However, as the novel develops, the women display their superiority over men in places like the home where they feel the most comfortable in. Likewise, the colonized also asserted their authority over the colonizers by refusing to work and going on strikes. Thus, while women are perceived to be of no importance at the beginning, Desai slowly develops them as the true wielders of power over men and this is parallel to how the colonized put themselves against the colonizers to gain authority over them.

Desai presents women as two extremes in their reactions to tradition in *In Custody*. On one hand, women are portrayed as doing all they can to free them from traditional stereotypes, while on the other; women are portrayed as passive, doing nothing to help themselves escape from tradition’s binds. The two women who are foils to each other are Imtiaz Begum and Sarla. As women are likened to the colonized, Desai wants to portray the contrasts within the same group of people, how they can be in the same situations, yet different in their resolves.

Sarla represents women who are passive and remain as traditional Indian women who are unable to progress because they have conformed to the traditional ways of stereotypical Indian women. Begum represents women

who constantly struggle to break away from the binds of tradition and societal conventions that constrict them. Sarla's aspirations that could not come through resulted in her giving up and "disappointment" (68), she has become subservient as a result of having to internalise such patriarchal oppression.

On the other hand, however, Imtiaz Begum dares to challenge the authority of men and rises up to do the things that women are not entitled, but men are, to do. She opposes Deven and gives him her poems to read so that she can prove her worth to him even though she is a woman of no education but what she has "found and seized for herself(myself)" (216). The usage of the word "seized" suggests that it was not an easy task for her to be able to learn to read and write and that she went through a lot of difficulty in doing so, which reflects her efforts to be different from the typical traditional Indian woman.

However, her doing so is frowned upon by society because it is perceived to be disrespectful. In the same ways, the colonized are divided into two parts, one of those who want to remove their colonizers, and one of those who are comfortable in conforming to the traditions and ways that their colonizers impose on them. Women freeing themselves from traditions binds are also reflective of the needs of the colonized for an individual, unique and personal identity that is not restricted by traditions or norms.