

# The Mimic (Wo)man 'Writes Back': Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to trace the articulation of resistance in terms of gender and the postcolonial condition in Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984). As one of the most prominent post-Independence Indian writers of her time, Anita Desai has been a strong voice in portraying the Indian domestic sphere. Accordingly, one of the main concerns of Desai's novels has been the representation of women and their struggles against patriarchal and colonial oppression. Though promising in many aspects, the political Independence of 1947 failed to unburden women from the ideal visions of womanhood promoted both by traditional community and colonialists in India. The present study focuses on the portrayal of women and female instances of resistance and the spaces through which they manage to survive in a male-dominated Post-Independence Indian society. Since the 1980s, Homi K. Bhabha has opened up a wide variety of critical issues fundamental to the understanding of colonial and post-colonial condition. His theorization of the idea of 'mimicry' is used in order to explore the socio-cultural interrelations Desai's novel seeks to reveal.

**Keywords:** Anita Desai; *In Custody*; Patriarchy; Resistance; Mimicry

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indian English novels written by male writers have mostly dwelled upon the questions of nation and history, events necessarily played out in the public sphere since the very beginning of their emergence, so much so that the critics have labeled "all Third World texts" as "national allegories" (Ahmad 78). However, as an accomplished writer and an observant literary critic, Anita Desai has declared that the sensibility of modern Indian female writers has remained noticeably discernible from that of their male counterparts. Female writers, Desai assumes, "tend to place their emphasis differently from men" because their experiences and "values" are different; being relatively confined within the closed boundaries of domestic space, women writers are "more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation," whereas men are mostly "concerned with action, experience and achievement" (qtd. in Gupta 104). Indian women writers are according to her still in search of their unique feminine identity and trying to establish it as something worth possessing. This differing attitude is manifested in her fiction as well where she tries to unravel the various assumptions associated with Indian femininity and gender politics and make her readers grasp what it is to be a woman and understand how a woman thinks and feels and behaves.

Desai's fiction, as some have said, is Chekhovian in its attention to "the sad humor of provincial lives" (Boyers 41) and in its depiction of a society in transition. Set in contemporary India her novels portray the changing attitudes and radical female resistance against patriarchally defined conventions of ideal womanhood. It seems that over the course of her novels Desai has evolved from narrating the inner lives of her characters to an awareness of the links between individual psychology and the social and cultural condition. Desai's interrogation of the Indian domestic space results in the emergence of the contradictions within the representation of the postcolonial subaltern women; she explores these contradictions within the framework of the realist tradition. However, this does not mean that her fiction is a mimetic representation of Indian culture. Desai provides a textual representation that "accommodates the conventions of mimesis while questioning and subverting them in order to secure a perspective that is both ambivalent and open-ended, one that displaces the colonial and the patriarchal in order to speculate a space for the marginal and the oppressed" (Kanaganayakam 80).

The oppression and marginalization brought about by the colonial condition has provided a space for Feminism and Post-colonialism to move in parallel as discourses of resistance, since they both share the mutual aim of challenging modes of oppression. The notion of "double colonization" entered the post-colonial and feminist discourses in the 1980s, indicating the fact that women in formerly colonized societies were doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies. In her essay "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-colonialism", Anne McClintock states that "women and men do not live "post-coloniality" in the same way" (McClintock 261). As a woman writer, Anita Desai reflects this experiential difference in her fiction. One of the main concerns of her novels has been the representation of women and their struggles towards achieving subjectivity.

The present study tries to consider the overlapping postcolonial and patriarchal boundaries and identify the spaces of resistance and the possibility of exerting a postcolonial subjectivity in Desai's *In Custody*. The novel exemplifies resistance within the feminist and postcolonial discourse, focusing on the lived realities of struggling marginalized subjectivities of post-independence India and providing a new perspective from which to look at the social and cultural spaces that have been regulated by the authority of dominant structures. Resistance in this sense denotes the attempt on the part of the writers such as Desai to expose the inner nuances of postcolonial condition and to destabilize the existing homogenizing passive outlook toward postcolonial Indian women.

## 2. INDIAN WOMEN AND POST-COLONIAL RESISTANCE

The concept of resistance is a vexed one in post-colonial studies, identifying a diverse range of forms, practices, and experiences of struggle. It has been discussed in different literary and socio-historical contexts in different geographies of the world; in most cases the concept of resistance has been associated with violent confrontation of post-colonial societies with colonial forces. However, this is a limiting outlook which fails to take into consideration the intricacies of anti-colonial resistance and recognize the fact that it can occur within different forms and modalities; thus it disregards the resilient patterns that reside in the cultural and literary productions of those societies (Ashcroft *Post-colonial Transformation* 30-31).

Gayatri Spivak proposes that literary texts can provide an alternative "rhetorical site" for articulating and understanding the histories of subaltern women. Focusing on Mahasweta

Devi, Spivak views her fiction as an example of the articulation of subaltern women's agency and resistance in the post-colonial world. Since official historical discourse tends to deny women's participation in struggles against domination and considers men to have the main roles in revolutionary movements in India, Spivak suggests that literature can provide a different space from which to look at socio-historical interrelations and articulate subaltern women's insurgency and resistance in the post-colonial India (Morton 55). After independence resistance continues to be reshaped in various forms whose patterns are incorporated in Desai's work. The writers of the present article aim at shedding light on these 'pattern'.

Edward Said in *Orientalism* keeps the spheres of colonizer and colonized rather apart and his focus is mostly on the colonizers. One of the questions that is not addressed by Said is the modality of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and the cultural interaction between them; this question is treated in the colonial discourse analysis of Homi Bhabha. Bhabha states that, "There is always, in Said, the suggestion that colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer, which is a historical and theoretical simplification" (Bhabha qtd. in Young 182). Yet what Said and Bhabha's critical views share is the idea that colonial power functioned by dividing the world into self and other. The reason behind this was to ensure the survival of colonial rule and justify its material inequalities and oppressive policies. Colonialist ideology assumed a civilizational gap between the Orient and the Occident. In the colonial Indian context, the oppressed and silenced Indian woman soon acquired a symbolic significance for the colonizers. According to Partha Chatterjee, "by assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country" (qtd. in Kanaganayakam 82). Spivak famously phrases this self-assigned "civilizing mission" of imperialism as: "White men saving brown women from brown men" ("Can the Subaltern Speak" 296).

Opposed to the imperialist civilizing mission was the nationalist emblematic construction of the Indian woman as the guardian and embodiment of Indian tradition and spirituality. Gandhi used the figure of the woman as the symbol of the Indian nation, Mother India, in nationalist discourse to encourage the active support of women in public demonstrations of passive resistance against imperialism. Elaborating on the idealistic attitude toward women, Chatterjee writes:

Indian women were supposed to dress in Indian clothes, they must not eat, drink, or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of religious rituals that men were finding difficult to carry out; they must maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin to which men could not now devote much attention. The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination. (Chatterjee *Nation* 130)

Clearly the national anti-colonial resistance did not fulfill its promises and failed to provide women's emancipation. Rather, the liberation of women was subordinated to the more immediate goals of national independence. When national independence was finally achieved in 1947, women's rights were ignored, and the gendered discourse of nationalism was revealed to have only idealized the place of women in the household.

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha explores the impacts of 19th century and twentieth century colonialism and distinguishes *mimicry* as one of the “concepts that work to undermine the simple polarization of the world into self and other” (Huddart 4). In his essay “Of Mimicry and Men,” Bhabha introduces mimicry “as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (Bhabha 85). Mimicry is recognized as a site of ambivalence in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. When colonial discourse claims cultural superiority over the colonized people and encourages the colonized subject to “mimic” them, by adopting their cultural habits, mannerism, and values, the result is never a simple reenactment of those cultural traits. Rather, the colonial desire for the colonized other to be civilized results in a “blurred copy” of the colonizer that can be quite threatening to the colonizer since if these mimic people are exactly the same as the colonizer then the aims of the civilizing mission is no longer justified. Mimicry therefore marks a fracture in the stability of colonial dominance and an uncertainty in its control of the behavior of the colonized (Ashcroft et al. *Key Concepts* 125).

This is why Bhabha declares that “mimicry displays the colonial desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha *Location* 86). Bhabha links the ambivalence of colonial discourse to transformation of the colonial representation and the problem of the stereotype:

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (Bhabha 75)

Bhabha believes that the ambivalence which resides in the act of mimicry opens up a space for the colonizer’s resistance and agency. This ambivalence can be considered as the active feature of post-colonial subjectivity which can generate reaction and resistance (Ashcroft *Transformation* 22). The constant contradiction between the illusion of difference and the reality of sameness results in anxiety. According to Bhabha, colonial power is always anxious that it might lose its authority and never attain a secure, stable distinction between itself and the colonized. He argues that this anxiety opens a gap in colonial discourse which can be exploited by the colonized, the oppressed, in their struggles to resist domination. In this sense mimicry marks “those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance” (Bhabha 121).

### 3. DISCUSSION

*In Custody* is Desai’s seventh novel and her second novel to be short-listed for Booker Prize; published in 1984, it marks a “conscious” shift in Desai’s writing, as the writer herself admits in an interview with Maggie Gee:

I made a very conscious effort with *In Custody*, to break away from the writing I’d been doing until then. I had written about the Indian family and women’s lives so often that I could almost do it blind, treading over and over again the same small piece of territory. But I couldn’t realistically have women characters just pushing open the doors of the world, so I had to write about men. (Gee 9)

The narrative centers around the tragi-comic life of Deven Sharma, who lives in Mirpore a small town near Delhi with his wife Sarla and their son Manu. Deven is a naïve lecturer who temporarily teaches Hindi literature at Lala Ram Lai College, while his true passion lies in the almost diminishing art of Urdu poetry. His old friend, Murad, the son of a wealthy Kashmiri carpet seller, who now works as the editor of an Urdu journal, “Awaz,” asks him to do a feature on Nur Shah Jehanabadi, the greatest living Urdu poet. The thought of doing an interview with a poet as great as Nur (literally: light) whose name “opened doors and changed expressions” is like a ray of hope for Deven who “had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings” (IC 26). To his surprise, Nur’s life is not at all dignified or impressive as Deven thought it would be. Deven meets Imtiaz, Nur’s second wife who is much younger than the poet, reciting poetry in front of a cheerful audience at her birthday celebration. Interrupting her recitation, Nur Leaves the celebration with Deven; Nur claims that she has robbed him of everything, that he is now a beggar and all his “jewels” stolen away from him (IC 87). Deven dislikes Imtiaz since he assumes that she is clearly the cause of the poet’s degradation.

As far as it concerns Deven, the novel is “a vision of life being lived inside a trap, while having a vision, as Dev has, through the poetry he loves, of a very different world, and not being able to break through to that until the very last moment when Dev accepts his life just as it is, and realizes that if he lives it, that is his freedom, too” (Gee 9). Though it seems that the narrative foregrounds for the most part a male protagonist, the surfacing of female characters is inevitable as Desai correspondingly declares:

I meant to keep women out of it altogether, because the world of Urdu poetry would be very male. But I found all these women whom I had locked out were screaming and thumping on the door and demanding to come in. (Gee 9)

One of those screaming voices is that of Imtiaz Begum, Nur’s second wife. Interestingly, it is in this novel where Desai tried to keep female characters out of the main course of the narrative that a strong female character emerges; unlike other women characters in her fiction, Imtiaz (ironically meaning “advantage”) rises not as a type but an individual women in search of autonomous identity. Imtiaz is a subversive woman whose genius and creative potential makes her ill-suited for the roles prescribed for women by the patriarchal post-colonial Indian society. As a women of literary talent Imtiaz is “in custody” of the male dominated literary and social community. Because she does not adhere to the role of the conventional Hindu woman and demands more from the her community, she is accused of being cunning and is othered and marginalized, not only by the male figures but even by women like Nur’s old wife who have internalized the patriarchal assumptions of Indian society:

A fine actress, that one, chuckled the old woman... ‘She used to be a dancing girl out there... ‘and she knows all the dancer’s tricks. Now she’s persuaded them she’s really ill. It is always like that when she wants something from him, always. (IC 121)

Desai represents patriarchy as “a system in which both men and women participate” (Johnson 5). In the two women’s relationship Desai’s hints at the complexities of the gender relations. As Choubey asserts, “Desai as a true humanist puts the blame not only on men who are suffering with the complex of male-superiority but also on women who oppress their

kind” (Choubey 89). Thus, the division of gender roles may be more complex than a simple male oppressor/female oppressed relationship.

Reaching beyond the regulations of her life, Imtiaz uses the ‘master’s tool,’ the male dominated language of Urdu poetry to make sure that her voice is heard and to confirm her existence and resist oppression. Exploring her unique subjectivity Imtiaz “writes back” to the oppressive forces of her community; she becomes a ‘mimic woman,’ an altered female subject and a figure capable of uttering resistance, who is both “resemblance and menace”:

When Deven brought himself to listen to a line or two, it was just as he thought: she said she was a bird in a cage, that she longed for flight, that her lover waited for her. She said the bars that held her were cruel and unjust, that her wings had been hurt by beating against them and only God could come and release her by lifting the latch on the cage door, God in the guise of her lover. When would he come? She languished, panting for the clouds that would carry him to her and the rain that would requite her thirst. Oh, it was all very beautiful, very feeling, very clever. Oh, she had learnt her tricks very well, the monkey. Did she not have the best teacher in the world to put these images, this language into her head? It was clear she had learnt everything from him, from Nur, and it was disgraceful how she was imitating his verses, parodying his skills, flaunting before his face what she had stolen from him, so slyly, so cunningly. (IC 82)

Though Bhabha seems to be gender-blind in his analysis of colonial and postcolonial condition, his theory of mimicry can be applied to Desai’s narrative. Discussing the notion of mimicry Bhabha maintains that, as one of the strategies of colonial power and knowledge, “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite* [...] Mimicry is [. . .] a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline which ‘appropriates’ the Other as its visualized power” (Bhabha 86). When colonial discourse ‘desires’ the colonized subject to ‘mimic’ the colonizer’s cultural habits, language, manners and values the result can only be a blurred copy which Bhabha calls a “sly civility.” This “repetition with difference” is menacing because of “its *double vision* which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also *disrupts* its authority” (Bhabha, qtd. in Huddart, 88). Thus Mimicry initiates the process of resistance and marks the anti-colonial attempt toward distinctiveness through the logic of “inappropriate appropriation” (Gandhi 150).

“Mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. Mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour of the colonized” (Ashcroft *Key Concepts* 125). This area between mimicry and mockery is, according to Bhabha, where the certainty of the reforming, civilizing mission of colonial authority is threatened and disrupted (Bhabha 86). Bhabha sees mimicry as “the sly weapon of anti-colonial civility, an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience.” (Gandhi 149) The mimic subject in the process of reforming challenges the inherent assumptions of colonial discourse by articulating it, as Bhabha puts it, “syntagmatically with a range of differential knowledges and positionalities that both estrange its ‘identity’ and produce new forms of knowledge, new modes of differentiation, new sites of power” (Bhabha 120 ).

Evidently, throughout the narrative of *In Custody* the relationship between male and female characters emerges as a hierarchal relationship, and shares the same inequalities of the hierarchal relationship of colonizer and colonized. As elaborated earlier, within the colonial contexts there is an intense desire and drive to make the colonized and oppressed appear, act, and be like the oppressor or the colonizer. But if the oppressed, or in our case, women, are

exactly like the oppressors, men, the ordering hierarchy cannot be maintained and thus the once desired mimicry becomes threatening. Similar to the desired mimicry of the colonizer, male characters like Deven and Nur appear to yearn for sameness, they desire a woman, a companion who shares their deep literary aspirations and concerns. Sarla, contrary to the spiritual yearnings of Deven, seems to aspire for material possessions, in one instance Deven refuses even to go home since he has to face his wife's "stony face, her sulks or her open fury" (IC 65), he knows that having "aspire [d] towards a telephone, a refrigerator, even a car," which magazine ads had assured her could be hers "in easy installments" (IC 67), she is embittered by the poverty she has to endure because of having married a college teacher. In Nur's case, when Deven meets Nur's first wife he admits that probably a man of such literary merits had no other way of choosing a wife who understood him:

It struck Deven as incongruous that he, a college lecturer, should be discussing the quality of Nur's poetry with this old woman cooking in her courtyard, watched by two goats and a child with a squint ... Walking away with her crude speech ringing in his ears, so unlike the flowery Urdu spoken upstairs, Deven wondered if this was why the poet had turned from an uneducated country wife to the kind he had upstairs. (IC 123-126)

Ania Loomba argues that after the independence in post-colonial India real women, though considered symbolic as mother to the nation, are granted limited agency. She emphasizes that arguments for women's education in metropolitan as well as colonial contexts are based on the logic that educated women will make better wives and mothers which means that they have to be taught not to overstep their bounds and try to take over authority from men (Loomba 182). Imtiaz's venturing into the world of Urdu poetry is an instance of overstepping the boundaries. Her poetry appears to Deven and Nur as a travesty of the tradition of Urdu poetry, thus her mimicry moves toward to mockery. Her mimicry produces a subject whose 'not-quite sameness' acts like a distorting mirror which fractures the identity of the male subjects. Accordingly, Deven refuses to acknowledge Imtiaz's literary giftedness and refers to her recitation as "insane whip":

This woman, this so-called poetess, belonged to that familiar female mafia, he thought, looking at her with unconcealed loathing. She would need only to shed her silver and black carnival costume and take on the drabness of their virtuous clothing. Dressed as she was, she would of course be barred from their society - they would have thought her no better than a prostitute or dancing girl... Why did Nur submit to her insane whim of performing in his house, the house of a poet? (IC 83)

Near the end of the novel she writes a letter to Deven asking him to judge her poetry; her letter is an expression of resistance and frustration toward the gendered hierarchies dominating Indian society:

I am enclosing my latest poems for you to read and study and judge if they do not have some merit of their own. 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. When you rose to your feet and left the *mehfil* while I was singing my verse, was it not because you feared I might eclipse the verse of Nur Sahib and other male poets whom you revere? Was it not intolerable to you that a woman should match their gifts and

even outstrip them? Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement, while I, because I was born female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected? Is it not you who has made me play the role of the loose woman in gaudy garments by refusing to take my work seriously and giving me just that much regard that you would extend to even a failure in the arts as long as the artist was male? In this unfair world that you have created what else could I have been but what I am? (IC 196)

Yet again Deven with knowing injustice leaves the poetry unread. His mind is so much preoccupied with Nur's "presence" that he is unwilling and perhaps unable to face a "new presence" like Imtiaz. Thus, Deven ignores her and relegates her to the "grotesque world of hysterics, termagants, viragos, the demented and the outcast" (IC 197).

In her influential article "Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses," Chandra Talpade Mohanty detects the play of a discursive colonialism in the "production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (Western) feminist texts" (Mohanty 333). The rendition of the third-world woman as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated, family-oriented, victimised," encourages and privileges the self-representation of Western women "as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and 'sexualities,' and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions" (Mohanty 337). That is to say, the implied cultural inferiority of the third-world woman reinforces the homogenizing yet seemingly redemptive ideological and political agendas of Western feminism.

Imtiaz Begum's situation exemplifies the idea that mimicry in patriarchal discourse, as in colonial discourse, denotes a flaw in the logic of oppression; it leads to ambivalence, which marks the inherent conflictive structure of patriarchal discourse in general, and the unstable relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed and opens up the space for subversion and the reclamation of agency of the subaltern. Through characters like Imtiaz, Desai seeks to divert the stereotypical assumptions attributed to 'third world women' and the passivity attributed to domestic space within the cultural structures of previously colonized societies such as India. She seems to emphasize that the domestic space may be associated with oppression but by no means to passivity and unbreakable silence.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In *In Custody* Desai manages to create a subaltern character screaming from the margins of the very narrative form of her novel. Nur's second wife, Imtiaz Begum is portrayed as a woman who appears to be aware of the dominating forces present in her life and demands her struggles against them to be acknowledged. Imtiaz in her outrageous performances demonstrates resistance and in doing so exemplifies Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry with a gendered context. Imtiaz manages to break out of 'the custody' of patriarchal authority and colonial stereotypical representations; she demands an equal position as a woman and a worthy 'custodian' of cultural richness of her society.

Anita Desai's fiction displays, to use Said's words, the "effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to *mix* with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories" (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 216). Desai's appropriation of the master's very tool of oppression (English) as means of articulation – just like Imtiaz's attempt to write poetry in Urdu – reminds us of the



transformative power of Language and literature as “source and womb of creativity, a means of giving birth to new stories, new myth, of telling the stories of women that have been previously silenced” (qtd. in McLeod 197). Thus Desai transforms English in order to enable new modes of representations through which the subaltern women *can* speak, and break out of the ‘custody’ of patriarchal and colonial domination.

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