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## Theme, Irony and Images in 'In Custody' by Anita Desai

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### ABSTRACT:

In Custody is a novel written in the year 1984 by a renowned Indian-American author Anita Desai. The book is about searching for identity and meaning in life. In the first chapter, the audience is introduced to a young man named Deven Sharma, who feels dissatisfied with his life and wallows in his sense of failure. Setting aside his life ambitions of becoming an Urdu poet, Deven settled in a loveless marriage with his wife who also feels discontent but afraid to speak her mind. To add to his frustrations, Deven makes his living teaching Hindi literature at a small college despite his first language being Urdu.

**Keywords:** Urdu, administration, ruminations, sycophants, harridans

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### Introduction

Ever since he was a child, Deven dreamed of becoming a great Urdu poet; he listened to his father recite different poems by a famous poet, Nur Shahjehanabadi, and had fallen in love with Urdu poetry. Now he feels trapped, with no purpose whatsoever, praying for someone to throw him an olive branch. While drifting in his failures, an opportunity to revive his life comes along. Deven is asked to interview the distinguished Urdu Poet Nur Shahjehanabadi.

Deven cannot believe that he is going to shake the hand of his idol and a master poet. He feels nervous and excited at the same time, and he believes that this is a chance to revive the elements that gave meaning to his life. With the support of his friends and the university, as well as a lot of whining and wheedling on his part, Deven prepares to interview Nur. The college provides all the equipment and finances for the interview, with the explicit expectation that Deven will produce something of serious value.

Nur lives in a rundown Delhi apartment building on the uppermost floor. As Deven steadily climbs the stairs, he feels his life is about to change for the better. However, as he makes his way up, his hopes start dwindling: the place is rife with garbage, drunkenness, fighting, and grime. When Deven eventually gets to Nur, he finds a frail, physically and emotionally tortured man surrounded by sham followers who live off his prosperity without offering anything in return. The poet's wives constantly quarrel with each other, while the others drink away what's left of the poet's wealth. Deven attempts to connect with Nur to no avail; he even pays for a new location for the interview, but the drama in Nur's life keeps coming up. Despite numerous attempts to make the interview work, it is a failure; as this becomes clear to Deven, he begins to question his self-worth and his love for Urdu poetry.

Eventually, Deven gives up on the project and prepares to face his colleagues and the college administration, but something in him has changed. After long and sleepless nights, Deven has something of a divine awakening: he realizes that he and Nur are practically the same and are inextricably linked now.

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### Verbal Irony: Mirpore

Deven once thought fondly of the countryside, but no more. He has very little nice to say about Mirpore; in his thoughts, he even laces his explanations of the town's characteristics with a bit of verbal irony. For example, he comments upon "Mirpore's addiction to total dehydration" (22), which, of course, cannot be true but is nonetheless an effective way for Deven to indicate his hostility towards its heat and dustiness.

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### Verbal and Situational Irony: Deven's "Consolations" to Nur

When describing Deven listening to Nur's grand complaints, the narrator says of the young man, "He stood open mouthed, wondering how to console the poet for the inexorable procession of time, but when he spoke...he stuttered" (48). The irony is in the glib comment that Deven would even be able to speak of such a weighty topic and even be able to convey his thoughts in a meaningful way to the greater man. Then there is a bit more irony, this time situational, in that Deven cannot even speak normally in response to this: he stutters, which is in complete contrast to the poet's ruminations.

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## **Dramatic Irony: Deven's Boasts**

The reader knows that Deven's boasts to Murad (91) and Siddiqui (98) are not altogether truthful, but his listeners do not. Against their better inclinations, they are impressed and decide to help Deven out even further, not knowing that the things he is saying and promising are not exactly what the agreement(s) indicated.

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## **Dramatic Irony: Deven's Visits**

Jayadev, Deven's colleague, laughingly asks, "who is this fair beauty of Delhi who lures you away every Sunday? The whole college is talking about her" (103). The irony here is that only is Nur not a woman and not a "fair beauty," it is actually a rather sordid, crass scene that Deven is entering when he goes to Delhi. The reader knows there is nothing sultry or alluring about the vomit, binging, sycophants, harridans, and other troubles of Nur's place.

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## **Imagery**

### **Mirpore**

Desai writes of Mirpore mostly through Deven's eyes to show how dull and dirty he thinks his current life is, and as a way for the reader to see that Mirpore is actually a good reflection of Deven's lackluster inner and outer lives. There are smoke-belching factories, "withered and desolate" (23) fields, the overwhelming "litter and paraphernalia and effluent of industry" (24), broken fences, cattle carcasses, empty skies, and the ever-present layer of dust. It is a place where hope and ambition go to die, and a place that represents Deven's strivings against his own weaknesses and ineptitude.

### **Women**

The women during this text square measure viewed through Deven's eyes, and thus they have a tendency to be pictures that square measure nearly caricatures, solely half-human. there's the beaten-down Sarla, whose glum expression reminds Deven of however ineffectual he's as a husband and father. there's the previous old woman Safiya, UN agency vexes Deven by soliciting for truthful compensation for Nur's contribution. and so there's the harridan/siren/Jezebel that's Intiaz, whom Deven considers to be the best obstacle to his work.

### **Deven's Evening Walk**

Desai paints a very melancholy, hopeless image of the wildlife to replicate however Deven feels within as his project spirals out of management. She writes that "even the celebs were smothered in murk. No message came whispering on a nocturnal breeze; each leaf on the tree decorated still, lifeless. get into the lane a bullock cart creaked by, the picket wheels lacking oil and shrieking dismally. Across the canal a stray dog barked in a very long monotonous howl of protest. Then there was silence" (131). Everything concerning the image is bleak and ominous, giving Deven—and the reader—little hope.

### **The Tapes**

It is a little however powerful image: at the tip of the redaction method, "the bottomless box of tapes [was] ultimately reduced to only one" (180). it's simple to image the various tapes Deven brought with him and therefore the single tape that results—it is a picture of wasted effort, failure, and crushed dreams. It shows the reader, once and for all, that can't be no miraculous turnaround for Deven: hoping that our agonist will succeed could be a commission.

### **The Decline of Urdu**

Although the novel is actually driven by its characters instead of its themes, every character represents a subject, and therefore the key one amongst these is that the decline of Urdu and therefore the loss of associate previous culture, symbolized by Siddiqui, Deven's fellow Urdu lecturer. Everything he stands for is encapsulated within the Urdu culture; consequently, he feels as if he's losing his identity.

### **Theme:**

Nur is associate Urdu author, however he realizes that the language is slowly dying out. Eventually, it'll be studied as one thing historical and ancient, instead of unbroken alive. he's aware that he's a illustration of things that square measure dying, and this looks to be creating his life unravel further. Deven is equally involved concerning the death of Urdu. He sees Urdu as one thing additional attention-grabbing and romantic than fashionable life can give. With the slow death of Urdu comes associate nearly Westernisation of India, of that not everyone seems to be in favor. Therefore, the death of a language, and therefore the culture that's dying with it, is seen as a form of cut-off purpose between the means things accustomed be and therefore the means that they're turning into.

### **Bullying and Manipulation**

Most of the characters within the book square measure extremely artful and don't get on well with others. Murad could be a bully; he's additionally terribly adept at enjoying Deven for a fool and knowing precisely what to mention so as to induce him to try and do what he desires. As a publisher, he desires Deven to interview Nur in order that he will create cash out of it, however he tells Deven that the interviews are useful in aiding students of Urdu to find out, knowing that this additional altruistic attack the interview can persuade Deven to travel back to Nur's house. The additional peripheral characters within the book are very artful. Nur's wives aren't getting along; their relationship is bitter and designed on a foundation of competition. His second better half is especially driven to steal his thunder and to create herself additional vital, victimization his fame as a author to try and do

therefore.

### **Patriarchal Society**

The female characters within the novel are not notably likable. None of them square measure educated; some square measure shrill harridans, whereas others square measure downtrodden housewives. In Deven's eyes, they're principally obstacles in his means of obtaining what he desires. however Desai is not creating associate anti-woman statement here: she is making an attempt to indicate what a patricentric society will do to women: however their expected silence makes them wish to create noise, however they simmer and sulk in their rage and disappointment, and the way they struggle to eke out no matter type of authority and autonomy they'll.

### **Life vs. Art**

Deven constantly faces a tug-of-war between life and art. He has familial obligations and bills to pay, but he wants desperately to live in the rarefied world of arts and letters. Other characters, such as the bachelor Siddiqui, the wealthy Murad, and the ancient poet Nur, have the luxury of doing so, but Deven does not. He wastes his time, money, and credibility trying to cross over to that other realm, and he ends up losing everything in the effort. By the end of the novel, he has come to a tacit understanding that he has to be realistic about his situation and make room for both life and art.

### **Self-Realization**

Deven certainly has several external factors working against his success at the recording project, but many of his issues are his own faults and flaws. He is, as Siddiqui calls him, "craven," as well as fickle, weak, selfish, whiny, and passive. For most of the novel, he tries to blame other people and situations for his problems, adopting a "woe-is-me" attitude and refusing to learn from his mistakes. However, by the end of the text, he has actually progressed enough to have a degree of self-realization: he knows the "calamities" that are coming his way and he will meet them; he has made peace with Nur and their relationship; he has decided to live his life as it is, not live in some fairy tale.

### **City vs. Country**

As the novel is essentially told through Deven's eyes, what we read of the city and the country is colored by his own biases. He finds Mirpore and the country to be dull, dirty, and colorless; he finds the city to be crass, loud, and overwhelming. He feels out of place in both, which symbolizes his larger disconnection from the world. But beyond Deven, we can see that Desai is neither privileging one nor the other, instead exploring the idea of what sort of milieu gives rise to, promotes, and sustains art. She is showing the tensions consumerism, modernism, and the Partition brought to both settings.

### **The Future vs. The Past**

Deven and Jayadev's conversation about the future vs. the past is an important one. Deven says, "We have no future. There is no future. There is only the past" (186), while Jayadev scoffs that he is tired of dwelling on the past and it is "the only thing we know in this country...I am sick of that. What about the future?" (186.) Desai doesn't answer this question, instead posing it to readers. Should we stop being obsessed with the past and devote ourselves to a better future? Or, by focusing solely on the future, do we lose what made us who we are as well as the knowledge we need in order to avoid making the same mistakes again?

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