

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

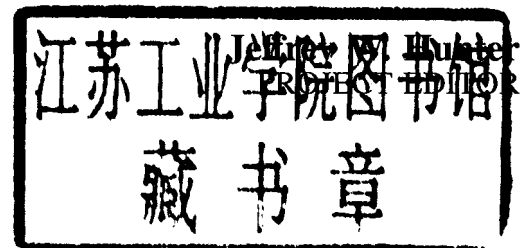
CLC

271

Volume 271

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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WilliamsComposition and Electronic Capture: Gary
Oudersluys

Manufacturing: Cynde Bishop

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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Anita Desai

1937-

Indian novelist, short story writer, screenwriter, and children's author.

The following entry presents an overview of Desai's career through 2008. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 19, 37, 97, and 175.

INTRODUCTION

Desai is one of the foremost Indian authors writing in English. Her novels present multiple perspectives on Indian life, but she is best known for her portrayals of Anglicized, middle-class women whose conflicts regarding self-identity embody the clash between traditional and modern values. Having spent the first forty years of her life in India before emigrating to the United States, Desai records first-hand knowledge of British colonial rule and the cultural changes that swept Indian society following its independence from Britain in 1947. Her insight into the psychology of the immigrant experience also draws on personal experience but is universalized through her recognition of the political and historical forces that have impacted the East and the West in similar ways. The lingering effects of imperialism figure prominently in Desai's writing, particularly in her observations on family generational and gender conflicts, ethnic insularity, religious and language wars, and Third-World capitalism. Desai's Indian and transnational themes have made her works important to the development of literary theories of postcolonialism and alterity.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Desai was born in northern India in the hill station of Mussoorie, Uttar Pradesh, high in the Himalayan Mountains. Her father, D. N. Mazumdar, was a Bengali engineer, and her mother, Toni Nime, was a German expatriate. Desai has said that she experienced India as both an insider and an outsider due to her exposure to her mother's European heritage. Desai was formally educated in English, but she was raised speaking German and Hindi. At the age of ten, Desai watched as Hindu mobs attacked Old Delhi's Muslim population during the partition of British India into the independent nations of India and Pakistan. Despite the

limited opportunities for women in Indian society, Desai earned a bachelor's degree in English literature from Delhi University in 1957. She pursued a writing career, publishing short fiction at first, and met her future husband, business executive Ashrin Desai, while working in Calcutta just out of college. Because most Indian publishers were uninterested in contemporary fiction at the time, Desai sought a British publisher for her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963). She first came to international recognition with *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), which describes an Indian woman and her great-granddaughter who are both seeking escape from suffocating circumstances at home. Desai has described her writing style, which relies heavily on imagery and symbolism, as less conservative than that of many other Indian writers, a factor she attributes to her lack of popularity in her native country. She credits the success of her later novels in part to the widespread appeal of Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), which created new outlets for Indian fiction. Desai moved to the United States in 1987, teaching first at Smith College and then at Mt. Holyoke College. In 1993 she took a position at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she is now Professor Emeritus in the Humanities Department. In addition to writing novels, three of which have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize, Desai continues to compose short fiction, and her book *The Village by the Sea* (1982) won the Guardian Award for Children's Fiction. In 1990 Desai received India's highest artistic honor, the Padma Shri, and in 1993 the film production team of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory released a film version of her novel *In Custody* (1984), for which she cowrote the screenplay.

MAJOR WORKS

Much of Desai's fiction, particularly her earlier novels, focuses on unhappy women who feel oppressed by the demands placed on them by Indian society. Conventional patriarchal thought in India posits that motherhood is the source of female power and that therefore the woman's place is in the home. Desai explores many of the myths and realities surrounding the theme of Indian motherhood, especially the exploitation and abuse of women, in several of her works. Desai's female characters often suffer emotional turmoil because they are bound to domestic duty while

witnessing an outside world of progressive political and social changes made possible by Indian independence. Desai's first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, chronicles the descent into madness and suicide of Maya, a young Delhi housewife who is trapped in a loveless, arranged marriage to the much older Guatama, a misogynistic lawyer. The same tragic end befalls one of the main characters of *Voices in the City* (1965). Monisha, one of the "voices" in the title, becomes so distraught by the stigma attached to her inability to bear children that she immolates herself. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), Sita, a desperate woman in her forties with four children, travels to Manori because she believes the island possesses magical powers that will allow her to safely terminate her latest pregnancy. *Fire on the Mountain* also explores the effectiveness of escapism as a coping mechanism. After a lifetime of dutiful servitude to her family and philandering husband, elderly widow Nanda Kaul purchases a house in the isolated hill country of Kasuli, hoping to live out her days in peaceful seclusion far away from any demands associated with motherhood. Nanda's tranquility is disturbed, however, when her great-granddaughter, Raka, arrives on her doorstep, having been forced out of her home by her parents' marital problems. Nanda at first resists the impulse to take Raka in, believing it would reverse her progress by placing her in a nurturing role again. In the end, Desai reveals Nanda's refuge at Kasuli to be illusory; in formulating an idealized version of her past for Raka, Nanda shows herself to still be consumed by her former life, despite her calculated resistance to it.

The character Bim in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) also attempts to assert herself, but she does so within the family framework. An unmarried woman who teaches at a woman's college, Bim remains at home to care for her autistic younger brother, Baba, while her sister, Tara, moves to the United States with her diplomat husband. Her older brother, Raja, leaves Old Delhi for business opportunities in another city. The fragmentation of the family is played out against the fracturing of the Indian nation, while the increasingly run-down condition of the family home suggests Bim's compromised independence. In contrast to these women, who fail to overcome societal limitations, is the main character of "The Rooftop Dwellers," from the short-story collection *Diamond Dust* (2000). Living in a small house in New Delhi away from her family, the protagonist, Moyna, finds other young adults who share her passion for combating negative stereotypes of the single, working woman.

Desai often uses male characters to underscore gender inequalities in India but, in addition, she takes advantage of their opportunities for greater mobility to expand upon themes of exile and alienation. *Fasting*,

Feasting (1999) portrays a woman and her much younger brother who are both outsiders; Una in their native country of India, and Arun in the United States, where he has gone to study. The "fasting" in the title refers in part to Una's deprived condition: her parents dote on Arun, the long-awaited son who is provided an overseas education, while Una is confined to the home, forced to give up her schooling and offered in two failed attempts at arranged marriage. Una begins to suffer fainting spells, which give her temporary release from her repression—a way of traveling away from the self, according to critic Angelia Poon, that does not require leaving the spatial confines of her home. In the meantime, Arun is alienated by American materialistic society—the "feasting" of the title—and by the habits of his host family, whose male members are sports fanatics.

Desai had first explored this theme of foreign exile in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1968), which portrays the intense xenophobia and prejudice that manifested in England during the influx of commonwealth immigration in the 1950s and 1960s. East and West meet again in *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), one of Desai's most highly praised and widely discussed works. The novel records the tragic life and violent death of Hugo Baumgartner, a Jew who emigrates from Nazi Germany to India in the late 1930s. Baumgartner is imprisoned in India as a hostile alien and then, ironically, he is killed by an Aryan German drug addict upon whom he has bestowed sympathy. Desai summarizes Baumgartner's dilemma early in the novel: "Accepting—but not accepted. . . . In Germany, he had been dark—his darkness had marked him the Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair—and that marked him the *firengi*. In both lands, the unacceptable." *Baumgartner's Bombay*, along with several other of Desai's novels, including *The Zigzag Way* (2004) and *Village by the Sea*, have been studied for their attention to imperialistic historical forces that still hold sway and conspire to disempower marginalized groups of people. *Zigzag Way* describes conditions in modern Mexico by harking back to the European capitalists there during the early twentieth century who exploited the British and the indigenous population in their mining enterprise in the Sierra Madre. In *Village by the Sea*, a peaceful fishing village on the west coast of India is slated to become part of an industrial complex devoted to the manufacture of agricultural fertilizers.

Desai also examines themes of identity and personal choice within a spiritual context. *In Custody* revolves around Deven Sharma, a middle-aged man who once dreamed of becoming a poet but who was forced to take a job teaching Hindi in order to support his wife and child. The novel dramatizes the tensions between worldly and spiritual concerns, and between the

Hindus and Muslims, through Deven's obsession with interviewing Nur, the greatest living Urdu poet. In another novel featuring the convergence of East and West, *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), a young and wealthy European couple embarks on a spiritual pilgrimage to India in pursuit of enlightenment. They eventually arrive at an ashram in northern India that is led by a charismatic elderly woman who calls herself "Mother."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have frequently praised Desai's imagistic prose and her ability to evoke the universal with details of the mundane. Claire Messud remarked in a review of *The Zigzag Way* that Desai is "a mistress of synecdoche, a writer whose delicate portraits of the quotidian resonate outwards to convey tumultuous swathes of history." Character analyses abound in the criticism on Desai, generally presented within the context of her portrait of an India in transition. Many studies have focused on the unique—and often extreme—methods Desai's female characters use to subvert male authority. Feminist critics have observed that Desai's women rarely achieve personal freedom, and some reviewers have blamed Desai for perpetuating patriarchal values. Similarly, Desai's protagonists—both male and female—have sometimes been criticized as unheroic because they appear to be controlled by historical and social forces rather than controlling them. On the other hand, a large number of scholars have viewed the seeming passivity of Desai's characters as a truthful representation of the collision of personal and historical reality. According to these critics, Desai depicts sexism, racism, ethnic suspicion, religious intolerance, and commercial exploitation—factors that contribute to the alienation of her characters—as the aftermath of colonial history, equally prevalent in the East and the West, and all posing obstacles to cultural pluralism.

It is Desai's sense of history as a "juggernaut," to use her own term, that many scholars have viewed as her most important contribution to postcolonial literature. As K. D. Verma explained, "The poststructuralist and postmodernist correction in which Desai's work participates brings out the moral and psychological truth of history—collectivity's overassertive narcissism and overindulgent egotism." Chelva Kanaganayakam concurred, remarking that "Desai's writing . . . provides a salutary reminder that, in moments of political and cultural upheaval, hegemony masquerades as egalitarianism." Desai's development of the idea of space, both personal and geographic, as a feature of the Self/Other alterity has also been discussed in terms of her understanding of the transnational dynamic, particularly as it relates to imperialism. Such critics as

Monika Fludernik, Angelia Poon, and Rachel Farebrother have praised Desai for not exaggerating the capacity of globalization to eradicate cultural difference, citing her many characters who remain bound by class and gender limitations. Desai has also been credited with problematizing postcolonial discourse by layering it, as in the novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*, with characters who do not fit neatly into the colonizer/colonized binary.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Cry, the Peacock* (novel) 1963
- Voices in the City* (novel) 1965
- Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (novel) 1968
- The Peacock Garden* [illustrations by Jeroo Roy] (juvenilia) 1974
- Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (novel) 1975
- Fire on the Mountain* (novel) 1977
- Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (short stories) 1978
- Clear Light of Day* (novel) 1980
- The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story* (juvenilia) 1982
- In Custody* (novel) 1984
- Baumgartner's Bombay* (novel) 1988
- In Custody* [with Shahrukh Husain] (screenplay) 1993
- Journey to Ithaca* (novel) 1995
- Fasting, Feasting* (novel) 1999
- Diamond Dust: Stories* (short stories) 2000
- The Zigzag Way* (novel) 2004

CRITICISM

Amina Yaqin (essay date February 2002)

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[In this essay, first presented as a paper in February 2002, Yaqin provides a history of Urdu in India, questioning the validity of Desai's nostalgic outlook on the language in her novel *In Custody*.]

INTRODUCTION

The question of Urdu in India is an extremely layered one which needs to be examined historically, politically and ideologically in order to grasp the various forces which have shaped its current perception as a sectarian language adopted by Indian Muslims, marking their separation from the national collectivity.¹ In this article I wish to explore those themes through the lens of literature, specifically an Indian-English novel about Urdu, Anita Desai's *In Custody*. Writing in the early 1990s, Aijaz Ahmad was of the opinion that the teaching of English literature has created a body of English-speaking Indians who represent "the only overarching national community with a common language," able to imagine themselves across the disparate nation as a "national literary intelligentsia" with "a shared body of knowledge, shared presumptions and a shared knowledge of mutual exchange."² Arguably, both Desai and Ahmad belong to this "intelligentsia" through the postcolonial secular English connection but equally they are implicated in the discursive structures of cultural hegemony in civil society.³ However, it is not my intention here to reinscribe an authentic myth of origin about Indianness through linguistic associations, but to assess the significance of Anita Desai's intervention in a communally charged Hindi-Urdu debate.

The key concerns I have in this essay are about the kind of cultural memory Desai presents in her novel, and how this depiction can be read in relation to the actual machinations of Indian politics with regard to the language question. As a successful author, writing for an international publishing market, she is invested with a certain power to represent an 'authentic' India. While she is not a writer who bombards us with an epic-style narrative, purporting to offer 'the great Indian novel', her exploration of individual identities and self-formations work in a subtle and problematic way, creating instead miniatures, and guiding the reader's responses through a combination of omniscience, internal focalization, indirect speech and symbolic tropes.

In Custody, shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1984, can retrospectively be read as a literary account of the communalization and disintegration of Urdu in post-Partition India. The year in which it was published was, coincidentally, the year that saw the death of an Urdu literary legend, the master lyricist Faiz Ahmad Faiz, who stirred the hearts of millions with his haunting melodies and sustained hope for many with his romantic vision of a return to a beloved homeland. Radiating optimism, his poetry revived disheartened nationalists with its belief in a destination which had not yet been realized, a desire for which marked even

his most pessimistic poem, "Subh-e azadi: August 1947 (Freedom's Dawn)," with its important ideological rejection of the "pock-marked dawn" of freedom from colonial rule:

The time for the liberation of heart and mind
Has not come as yet
Continue your arduous journey
This is not your destination.⁴

It is ironic that Faiz, stylistically wedded to the traditional form of the ghazal, was concerned with forging themes of modernity in his poetic message, constructing a new direction for his Urdu listeners and readers, while Desai, working with a modernist narrative, takes it back toward a sensibility rooted in tradition and premodern aristocracy. Her idea of Urdu is that it is trapped in an aristocratic lineage, a theme which she also touches on in her earlier novel *Clear Light of Day*.⁵ Desai's perception of Urdu as an artefact of Old India and its communal heritage are key features of her story. One of the narrative devices she uses is that of cultural memory, and this, in connection with the theme of Urdu, is inevitably tied to the memory of separation and Partition. Here it is important to make the distinction that, whereas Faiz is still looking for national liberation in "Subh-e azadi," Desai is analysing Urdu as the cultural object of a lived experience in post-Partition India. Later in his career, Faiz was commissioned by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government in post-Partition Pakistan to conduct an 'official' search for Pakistani culture and nationalism. His findings and ruminations were subsequently collected and published in a volume entitled *Pakistani kalchar aur qaumi tashakhus ki talash* (Pakistani culture and the search for national character).⁶ In this volume, it is evident that Faiz was driven by an Arnoldian cultural sensibility looking to preserve "culture as perfection" in his search for a representative model of a future collective Pakistani national consciousness.⁷ Desai's fiction, by contrast, demystifies the idea of a national collectivity and looks to the arts and the way of life of individuals for distinctive cultural representations. Her depictions of cultural memory are marked by a nostalgia for the past and a closeness to the Romantic tradition and its "idealizing of the 'folk', of vital subcultures buried deep within its own society."⁸

Desai's narration of Urdu's tragedy is mediated through the eyes of an urban dweller in New Delhi struck by the lyrical romance of Old Delhi Urdu poetry, a remnant of a pre-modern cultural tradition that rememorizes the old Mughal city of Shahjahanabad. According to Christopher Bayly, "the fate of the three great cities of the Mughal imperial triangle, Delhi, Agra and Lahore, has been most particularly

the subject of romantic lament.” This critique ties in with Desai’s artistic sensibility and choice of subject-matter.¹⁰ In an interview with Magda Costa, Desai responded as follows to the suggestion that *In Custody* is a representation of the decay of Urdu literature:

I was trying to portray the world of Urdu poets. Living in Delhi I was always surrounded by the sound of Urdu poetry. 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?¹¹

Aijaz Ahmad, tracing the history of Urdu language and literature from 1947 to 1965, describes three aspects of the break-up and redistribution of the Urdu writing community that changed the perception of Urdu after Partition. First was the migration and resettlement of religious communities across the newly drawn borders; second was the increased communalization of Urdu as a Muslim language, its implementation as a national language in Pakistan and its decreasing status as a language of ‘minority right’ and ‘Muslim interest’ in India; and finally, the Indian Parliament’s abandonment of Hindustani in favour of Hindi as the official language. In Ahmad’s estimation, the loss of Hindustani as a recognized lingua franca was a major event because it had served as a “living link between Urdu and Hindi which now became more and more distant from each other, especially in their written forms.”¹² In postcolonial India—specifically Uttar Pradesh, where the mother-tongue Urdu speaker has been marginalized through a lack of representation in the linguistic federation of states—Urdu is indeed perceived as an endangered language by the minority who are literate in it.

For Ahmad, the political nation and the cultural community are the two ultimate “framing realities” which dominate post-Partition Urdu literary production in India and Pakistan. With the absence of a middle-ground Hindustani, the communal perception of Urdu as a Muslim language has become stronger. This religious separatism saturates the verse of a contemporary Urdu poet, Rashid Banarsi from Varanasi:

We understood a lot about the prejudices of this age
Today languages too are Brahmins and Shaikhs? We
don’t
understand
If Urdu too is under blame for being an outsider
Then whose homeland is India? We don’t understand.¹³

There are interesting similarities between Desai, Ahmad and Banarsi, all speaking of Urdu but in varying tones and differing forms. Desai’s pessimistic view of Urdu’s survival in India is tied to the fact of mass Muslim migration, Ahmad sees migration as a contributory factor in the break-up of the Urdu writing community, and Banarsi articulates the frustration that comes from Urdu’s marginalized status and its perception as a migrant’s tongue, which makes him an outsider/other in his own home. The Urdu that was the “voice of North India,” as Desai remembers it, and its survival are indeed major concerns for Urdu traditionalists, and in turn those anxieties reinforce a region-specific idea of Urdu eliding its identification as a lingua franca. The limitation felt by poets such as Banarsi who cannot escape the reflected cultural memory of Urdu is recognized and re-imagined in a novel such as *In Custody*. If a common historical moment is to be mentioned which irrevocably changed the idea of Urdu in India, then that is the time of Partition.

Sunil Khilnani, in his insightful study entitled *The Idea of India*, has argued that Partition is a tangible memory in the subcontinent

around which the inevitable disappointments of modern politics can gather [. . .] Partition is the unspeakable sadness at the heart of the idea of India: a memento mori that what made India possible also profoundly diminished the integral value of the idea.¹⁴

For Khilnani, the idea of India is ultimately a political one because in his view the history of India since 1947 has been marked by a continuing faith in democratic procedures, expressed through party politics; Indians have in the past been inspired by the charisma of the Congress Party, and more recently by regional, caste-based and communal political groupings. In this respect, the evolving modern nation is still disrupted by hierarchical stratifications and—in the sometimes fraught relationship between Hindu and Muslim—the memories of its ruptured birth.

In the opening section of Desai’s book, the protagonist Deven, a lecturer in Hindi, applies in person for a week’s teaching leave in order to conduct an interview with the legendary Urdu poet Nur Shahjahanabadi. However, his head of department, Trivedi, meets the request with a belligerent, short-tempered and communally charged reaction:

“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.”

(145)

Trivedi’s reactionary stance encapsulates the fear and paranoia that surrounds Hindi and Urdu speakers in a national culture where language is, ironically, both the

carrier of religious identity and the marker of national loyalty. Trivedi's utterance, long before the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, has an ominous ring to it. With its evocation of the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*), it can retrospectively be seen to anticipate majoritarianism in India, and the monologue of his speech stays with us in the Bombay riots, the violent eruptions in Gujarat, the continuing Kashmir crisis.

THE HINDI-URDU DIVIDE

The knotty issue of national language has been a topic of much scholarly deliberation in historiographical and sociological studies of the Indian nation. Several researchers have drawn our attention to the contentious fates of Hindustani, Urdu, and Hindi in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India.¹⁵ Such linguistic differences can be read as marking an important distinction from what Benedict Anderson has theorized as an integrated "imagined community" coming together through a common language through the rise of a homogenizing print capitalism.¹⁶ These studies have revealed a multilingual nation which cannot comfortably assimilate its diverse linguistic groups.

Urdu came to prominence in the middle-to-late eighteenth century at the same time as the ousting of Persian from the courts by the British and its replacement with the official language of government, English. Generally, in eastern and northern India, Bengali and Urdu remained in use on the lower levels of administration and judiciary, while in the northern state of Punjab, the British imposed English and Urdu "as the languages of government."¹⁷ On an informal basis they relied on Hindustani/Urdu as a lingua franca in North India, while official recognition was accorded to the vernaculars on 4 September 1837.¹⁸ While the Muslim reformer and early modernizer Sayyid Ahmad Khan was deeply influential in instigating linguistic reform and advocating cultural change for his community, his interventions in the cause of Urdu with the colonial government suffered setbacks in Bihar in 1881 and in Uttar Pradesh in 1900 under pressure from a rising middle-class Hindu lobby.¹⁹ According to Francis Robinson, the proposed replacement of Persian script by Nagari, led by a Hindu deputation in 1900, and the British government's favourable response to it marked a key moment in the increasing sense of separatism among Indian Muslims.²⁰

The historical perspective of Urdu's decline has been directly linked to Hindi's rise by Jyotirindra Das Gupta, who charts the national movement alongside language associations in pre-Partition India.²¹ He claims that after 1882 the Hindi movements pressed for teaching Hindi universally in all primary and

secondary schools in North India. It was in the North Western Provinces that the Hindi movement displayed an antagonistic stance toward Urdu.

The constant refrain of the public petitions was that Urdu was an alien language. A petition signed by 500 Hindi graduates and undergraduates declared Urdu to be 'an alien and upstart language' while another petition described Urdu as a "hybrid production [...] forced upon us by our former rulers."²²

In Gupta's view, "a large part of the language conflict in UP is influenced by the memories of past conflict transmitted to the Hindu and Muslim communities by the cultural and political leaders."²³ For Gupta, these conflictual linguistic associations can be historically linked to the shortsightedness of small elites whose community consciousness dictated their group loyalty in the transitional period from a traditional multilingual society to a modern nation. Thus in the early nationalist phase in India "leaders rarely drew a distinction between the categories of common language, national language and official language."²⁴

For David Lelyveld, too, sociological perspectives are paramount in examining the organic history of languages such as Hindi and Urdu, rather than an abstract theorizing which focuses on "who gets to speak, who is allowed to listen, which topics and settings are appropriate to which linguistic codes."²⁵ He suggests that in attempting to understand this linguistic code we may come closer to grasping the unique formula which delicately balances the formation of self-conscious identity against the facts of power, competition and exploitation. To put his sociological theory to the test, Lelyveld examines Gandhi's role in nurturing an Indian national consciousness through a unified Indian language, which would both reflect the identity of Indians and bridge the linguistic diversity of its many regions. He argues:

It would be debatable in 1916 to say that Hindi was Hindu and Urdu was Muslim, but there were certainly grounds and occasion for relating language and religion in this way. It was one of the central projects of Gandhi's life, and a tenet of the Indian National Congress after 1920, that the national language must overarch this distinction, that instead of being Hindi or Urdu, it should be Hindustani.²⁶

Historically, the Indian National Congress gave official recognition to Hindustani in its 1934 constitution. Hindustani, suggested by Gandhi as a neutral solution to the thorny Hindi-Urdu controversy, would reflect a unified national consciousness free from religious affiliations. But the stumbling-block on which the neutral solution fell apart was that of the script. In Sunil Khilnani's view, after Independence "Nehru's initial hope had been for India's regional states to continue as the

mixed, multi-lingual administrative units established by the Raj.²⁷ Nehru's government resisted the pressure from the Hindi lobbyists for a centralizing national language, and reached a compromise with the post-Partition Indian Constitution (1950) recommending a fifteen-year use of English for official purposes, with Hindi in the Nagari script as the 'official' language of the Union, and also extending recognition to other regional languages. But eventually this pluralism had to be altered to accommodate the demand for decentralization and the formation of linguistic states. The Official Languages Amendment Act of 1963 gave Hindi the hegemonic status of 'official language' and English the secondary role of 'associate' or additional official language.²⁸ The Official Languages Amendment Bill adopted in 1967 included the acceptance of a historic Three-Language-Formula which would be implemented in secondary education for language teaching. It recommends: "(a) the regional language and mother tongue when the latter is different from the regional language; (b) Hindi or, in Hindi speaking areas, another Indian language; and (c) English or any other modern European language."²⁹

With regard to the situation of Urdu in contemporary India, the language controversies of the past have had a detrimental effect on the status of Urdu wherever religious identity has come to inform the ideologically separatist correlation of Muslim=Urdu=Pakistan and Hindu=Hindi=India.³⁰ According to Athar Farouqui, the situation of native Urdu speakers has deteriorated in Uttar Pradesh to such an extent that "there is not even a single primary or junior high school of Urdu medium. The only two Urdu medium schools are run by and affiliated to Aligarh Muslim University."³¹ For Farouqui, the Three-Language-Formula in Uttar Pradesh has thus far failed to serve the needs of mother-tongue speakers of minority languages. He passionately dismisses the Formula as a "whitewash" because it has failed to represent the regional Urdu community of Uttar Pradesh by recognizing Hindi as the language of the region on the basis of inaccurate data collection of linguistic speech communities. Farouqui is outraged by the North Indian chief ministers' unilateral implementation of the Formula, which recognizes Hindi as the regional language, Sanskrit as the modern language, and English as a foreign language. To him, this signifies a sinister political manipulation of the Urdu minority in North India, particularly at the time of census-taking, which, he argues, took for granted that everyone's mother tongue in the area was Hindi.³² In Zoya Hasan's estimation, the Hindi-Urdu controversy in Uttar Pradesh has an explicit agenda of "political dominance and equally significant subtexts on the cultural identity of the state and alternative conceptions of political community."³³

Hasan places the blame squarely on government policy, which has treated Urdu as a minority Muslim affair breaching the stance on linguistic pluralism and the separation of language and religion. The conflation of language and religion in the sanskritized official Hindi expansion programme has also created further alienation and division among the already communalized linguistic groups.³⁴

THE DECAY OF URDU IN CUSTODY

In Custody tells the story of the decline and decay of Urdu in modern India. Deven, the anti-hero of the novel, is a Hindi lecturer devoted to the classical tradition of Urdu poetry, a devotion that stems from his childhood associations with the language as a mother tongue speaker. Born in Lucknow, educated in Delhi, he is a poor widower's son who has found employment as a university lecturer at Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore. While his career as a language specialist is not particularly lucrative, it has been directed by a practical consideration of the market economy, which favours Hindi, the language of communication in North India. Urdu fulfils his imagination and Hindi sustains his corporeal needs. "I am—only a teacher [. . .] and must teach to support my family. But poetry—Urdu—[. . .] I need to serve them to show my appreciation."³⁵ Deven feels trapped and frustrated in the confines of his chosen home, so when the opportunity of returning to the capital presents itself through the intervention of his childhood friend, Murad, he takes an uncharacteristically risky step by agreeing to Murad's suggestion. In taking this decision, he is temporarily freed from the constrictions of his existence in the small town of Mirpore, which had come to resemble the metaphorically "impassable desert that lay between him and the capital with its lost treasures of friendships, entertainment, attractions and opportunities" (24).

The northern plain of Mirpore, situated "more than a thousand miles from the coast," had been shaped by the presence of Muslim aristocracy, in this case a long-forgotten nawab who had fled Delhi to escape the aftermath of the 1857 Mutiny and built a mosque in Mirpore as a memorial of thanks to his Supreme Benefactor for preserving his life. The narrator tells us that the history of the mosque has been swept away in the dust which saturates the Mirpore atmosphere, and all that remains of the "marble and pink sandstone" is a decaying, filth-ridden stone structure overtaken by the debris of modernity. But the narrator reiterates its continued use as a mosque. Continuing to map the cultural traditions of Mirpore, she tells us: "The temples were more numerous but had no history at all. There was literally not a man in Mirpore who could have told one when they were built or by whom" (20).