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Whispers of Urdu: Language Politics and Non-Hegemonic Masculinities in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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Abstract

The paper intends to discuss the decline of the composite linguistic/literary cultures fostered by Urdu, in terms not merely of a narrative of linguistic deterioration but as a potent metaphor for the disintegration of traditional masculine roles in post-independence India. In doing so, it will attempt to read Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984) vis-à-vis the disempowerment of a once-glorious linguistic and cultural ethos fostered by Urdu. With the expansion of British colonial power, Urdu, previously the language of the elite *nawabi* circles, yields to English, signifying the decline of Muslim cultural legacy. The consolidation of nationalist forms of cultural self-expression foregrounded Hindi as the venerated language of the nation-in-the-making, relegating Urdu to the periphery. Desai's novel is a poignant reflection of the absolute impossibility of cultural reclamation contingent upon the emergence of communalized power structures and linguistic hegemony. Through the figure of Nur, an ageing Urdu poet, Desai portrays a world where language is inseparable from personal and collective selfhood. The displacement of Urdu serves as a powerful metaphor for the emasculation and cultural alienation experienced by men like Nur who once found status and meaning through their embodiment of a flourishing linguistic tradition. Nur's passage into oblivion mirrors the broader vulnerability of men who are unable to adapt to the new linguistic and socio-political order. Urdu, positioned in the novel as the language of poetic creativity and masculine prestige, becomes a site of nostalgic mourning and symbolic disempowerment. Desai's narrative thus dramatizes the intersections of language and gender, illustrating how linguistic shifts dismantle deeply entrenched notions of masculinity.

Keywords: Emasculation, Disempowerment, Cultural Decay, Nostalgia, Vulnerability

Language has long served not only as a medium of communication but as a powerful site of identity construction and social differentiation. Among its many functions, one of the most significant, yet often overlooked, is its role in shaping and sustaining gendered identities, particularly masculinities. The intricate

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relationship between language and masculinity has received growing scholarly attention in recent decades. As Robert Lawson observes, "language is implicated in the gendered structures of power, domination, and control" and plays a crucial role in sustaining the privileged status of men within social hierarchies (409). R.W. Connell maintains that the performativity of masculinity is implicated in cultural attributes such as language, by virtue of which certain forms of manhood are hegemonically celebrated, whereas others are subordinated or marginalized (76–77). Within this framework, language becomes both a symbolic resource and a tool of differentiation, granting power to those who possess the linguistic capital associated with authority, refinement, or cultural centrality. It is only through "close examination of discourse that we can illuminate the myriad linguistic means through which the status of men is sustained" (Baker and Brookes 199). It is in the light of the observations outlined above that this paper intends to discuss the decline of the composite linguistic/literary cultures fostered by Urdu, in terms not merely of a narrative of linguistic displacement but as a potent metaphor for the disintegration of traditional masculine roles in post-independence India. In doing so, it will attempt to read Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984) vis-à-vis the disempowerment of a once-glorious linguistic and cultural ethos fostered by Urdu. The essay adopts an interdisciplinary critical framework to understand how language functions not only as cultural capital but also as a precise narrative of masculinity in retreat.

I

Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984) provides a complex portrayal of masculinities within the context of postcolonial India, where language, culture, and social roles are in a state of flux. As part of a nuanced narrative mosaic, the novel situates the crisis of masculinity within the larger context of linguistic and cultural decline. The novel explores the gradual disintegration of Urdu and frames this decline as a potent metaphor for the emasculation of the Muslim male. Urdu, once aligned with the masculine authority of the Mughal court, becomes a fragile relic of nostalgia, emblematizing cultural marginalization and displacement. Set against the backdrop of a nation redefining itself after independence, Desai's novel centers on Deven, a middle-aged Hindi lecturer who becomes entangled in the decaying world of an eminent but fading poet, Nur Shahjehanabadi. A seasoned connoisseur of Urdu poetry, Deven finds himself caught in the throes of a culture that no longer values the language he reveres. His mufassil existence takes a turn when Murad Beg, an opportunistic friend and editor of an Urdu literary magazine *Awaaz*, convinces him to interview Nur, the once-great Urdu poet now languishing in obscurity. Deven's journey to meet Nur exposes him to the stark realities of cultural and linguistic decline. He discovers that once a towering figure of Urdu poetry, Nur is now a shadow of his former self. The poet lives in disarray, surrounded by a chaotic household dominated by his shrewish second wife and sycophantic hangers-on. Despite this, Deven is captivated by Nur's poetic brilliance and sees an opportunity to preserve his legacy through a tape-recorded interview. However, this endeavor

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proves fraught with challenges, from the lack of institutional support for Urdu to financial constraints and Nur's erratic behavior. Deven's attempt to document Nur's poetry becomes a symbolic struggle to save a fading art form, but it also highlights the futility of trying to preserve something that society no longer values. Through the decline of Urdu, Desai charts the erosion of cultural pride and gendered power structures, revealing how masculinity, long tied to linguistic mastery and cultural stewardship, becomes increasingly precarious in the shifting currents of nationhood and modernity.

II

Language systems thrive on hegemonic masculinity and a tacitly accepted idea of male power enshrined within them (Baker & Brookes 92). As Scott Kiesling argues, masculinity is often maintained through language—through discourse, dominance, and public authority (660). Prestigious language varieties—those associated with state power, literary history, or religious authority—often underpin hegemonic masculinities, granting symbolic capital to men who acquire mastery over them. Language mastery, especially in elite circles, is thus frequently tied to performances of masculine competence, authority, and social respectability. Urdu is not just a preferred linguistic medium for a select group; it is a cultural worldview, closely tied to a specific ideal of Muslim masculinity. For centuries, Urdu existed not simply as a language but as a symbol of refinement, power, and elite identity, especially among Indian Muslims. With its cultural connotations of nobility and honour, it evolved as a prestigious dialect of *Hindustani*, closely associated with the elite Muslim *ashraf* class in India. Its Persian and Turkish influences, courtly associations, and literary richness rendered it not merely as a linguistic system but a potent emblem of elite identity (Siddiqui and Siddiqui 108–09). While Persian remained the administrative language of the court, Urdu gradually emerged as a lingua franca among the upper echelons, never fully rooted in the vernacular life of the indigenous populace but deeply embedded in urban, elite, male-dominated cultural production. Over time, especially during the Mughal and post-Mughal periods, linguistic mastery in Urdu became inseparable from performances of respectable, refined Muslim masculinity—especially within *ashraf* circles where the command over chaste Urdu conferred prestige and honour by shaping Muslim male selfhood through poetic articulation, courtly sophistication, and linguistic capital.

Performative masculinity in the Urdu poetic tradition particularly thrived on the poetic form of the *ghazal*, often distinguished by stylized emotional expression, wit, and intellectual refinement. Such self-conscious usage of the male idiom in poetic compositions came to be known as *rekhta*, which was markedly different from *rekhti*, the idiom preferred by women and courtesans. In her book *Gender, Sex and the City*, Ruth Vanita suggests how Urdu's literary world was deeply gendered—while *rekhta* operated within a male-coded aesthetic, *rekhti*—pejoratively known as '*auraton ki zubaan'*, where male poets adopted female voices—was relegated to the margins as vulgar, decadent, and inferior in terms of

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literary merit. The rejection of *rekhti* reflects not only patriarchal anxieties but also colonial disdain for gender fluidity in expression. As a love lyric composed in two-line verses centered on idealized love (*ishq*), the *ghazal* conventionally portrayed a masculine lover (*ashiq*) addressing a masculine or grammatically neutral beloved (*mashuq*), with masochistic suffering as a recurring convention. Although Urdu poetry employs gender-ambiguous pronouns such as *voh* and *un*, as Carla Petievich notes, the expressive world of *rekhta* carefully preserved masculine norms: ambiguity did not imply femininity but rather created space for a stylized, often homoerotic, masculine emotionality (228). Petievich further argues that this stigmatization was tied to larger processes: under colonial critiques of decadence, rising Muslim conservatism, and nationalist cultural defensiveness, Urdu's male literati marginalized *rekhti* to preserve the cultural prestige of *rekhta* as a symbol of dignified Muslim masculinity. While *rekhta*'s gender-ambiguous conventions permitted a "safe" articulation of male homoeroticism, expressions of female desire were systematically foreclosed (228). Thus, Urdu continued to serve as a central icon of masculine cultural identity among South Asian Muslims by sacrificing its more fluid and subversive literary traditions to uphold a sanitized, respectable image of elite male authority.

III

With the expansion of British colonial power, Urdu, previously the language of the elite *nawabi* circles, yields to English, signifying the decline of Muslim cultural legacy. The consolidation of nationalist forms of cultural self-expression foregrounded Hindi as the venerated language of the nation-in-the-making, relegating Urdu to the periphery. The rise of Hindi and Urdu as distinct linguistic communities was deeply intertwined with gendered and patriarchal ideologies. Nationalist ideologies sought to establish Hindi as the embodiment of a moral, standardized, and masculine national language. Hindi, particularly in its *Khari Boli*[i] form, was championed as the language of progress and modernity, aligned with the nationalist vision of a disciplined, morally upright society. Urdu, associated with the Mughal court and its sensual indulgences, was portrayed as decadent, feminized, and irreconcilable to the moral fabric of the emergent nation-state. This ideological reordering of languages, predicated upon the Hindi-Urdu controversy, became a crucial site of cultural and political contestation in early 20th century India. Harish Trivedi observes that during the late nineteenth century, Hindi underwent a process of increasing Sanskritization, while Urdu became more Persianized, deepening the symbolic rift between the two languages (959). Hindi emerged as the language of the people, of indigenous nationalism, while Urdu was increasingly stigmatized as an alien inheritance, burdened by its association with Islamic rule and Mughal aristocracy. The historical decline of Urdu, contingent upon the expansion of British colonial power and the proliferation of English, was further accelerated by the Partition, especially as languages got inextricably interlinked with communal identities. In post-Partition India, as scholars like Sanober Umar have argued, the marginalization of Urdu cannot be seen only as a

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linguistic phenomenon but as part of a broader cultural and political project. The abandonment of Urdu from educational institutions, public administration, and everyday life contributed to the de-castification and racialization of Indian Muslims (Umar 192).

In Custody juxtaposes the fading elegance of Urdu poetry with the meteoric rise of Hindi, shedding light on how linguistic debates were shaped by patriarchal notions of morality, masculinity, and cultural sanitization. In the novel, "the new imperialism of the Hindi language, and the decay… is all too tragically evident throughout the assuring body of Indian society" (Desai viii). The political marginalization of Urdu emerges in Desai's novel as an intimate tragedy embodied in Nur, who voices, "How can there be Urdu poetry where there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished. The defeat of the Moghuls by the British threw a noose over its head, and the defeat of the British by the Hindiwallahs tightened it. So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried" (Desai 39). The displacement of Urdu serves as a powerful metaphor for the emasculation and cultural alienation experienced by men like Nur who once found status and meaning through their embodiment of a flourishing linguistic tradition. Nur's passage into oblivion mirrors the broader vulnerability of men who are unable to adapt to the new linguistic and socio-political order.

When a language loses status, the gendered structures tied to it also undergo a radical reallocation. Urdu, once the domain of male erudition, was disinherited of not just cultural capital, but gendered legitimacy. The story of Urdu in postcolonial India does not only present a trajectory of linguistic displacement but a pattern of disempowerment, emasculation, cultural loss, and erasure. Through Nur's decay, Deven's disempowerment, Murad's exploitation, and Siddiqui's indifference, Desai presents a world in which language, masculinity, and cultural memory are all under siege. The novel mourns not only a language but a mode of being—an ethos of eloquence, dignity, and nuanced masculinity that no longer has a place in the pragmatic world of neoliberal ambition tied to Hindi. The bureaucratic indifference and institutional neglect faced by Urdu poets like Nur reflect the systemic marginalization of Urdu as a cultural force. Deven's attempt to document Nur's work becomes a Sisyphean task, highlighting the futility of preserving a language that has been rendered powerless by both colonialist and nationalist ideologies. Urdu's decline is paralleled by the fall of the Muslim male elite who once derived power and prestige from its mastery.

The link between gender and language becomes particularly visible when such linguistic systems are displaced or marginalized, threatening the masculine subjectivities embedded within them. The theoretical model offered by R.W. Connell distinguishes between hegemonic, subordinated, and marginalized masculinities. While subordinated masculinities are devalued due to their deviation from dominant gender norms, marginalized masculinities are those relegated to the periphery due to structural factors like race, religion, or class (Connell 78). Language plays a vital role in this marginalization, especially when specific

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languages become identity markers of disadvantaged or politically excluded communities. The linguistic subordination of such groups often serves to reinforce dominant masculinity by delegitimizing alternative gender performances that rely on non-dominant tongues. Yet, men from these groups may engage in acts of linguistic resistance, attempting to reclaim prestige and selfhood, though often within the constraints of the very hegemonic norms they seek to challenge (Baker and Brookes 133).

IV

Desai's novel is a poignant reflection of the absolute impossibility of cultural reclamation contingent upon the emergence of communalized power structures and linguistic hegemony. Through the figure of Nur, an ageing Urdu poet, Desai portrays a world where language is inseparable from personal and collective selfhood. In the novel, the figure of Nur Shahjehanabadi functions as a living allegory of cultural decay. Once a celebrated icon of literary refinement and patriarchal authority, Nur now languishes in physical infirmity and social irrelevance, surrounded by sycophants and a disordered household. His deterioration mirrors not merely personal failure but a profound cultural disintegration. Initially introduced as a grand, marble-like presence, Nur's body is described in strikingly monumental terms — clothed in white, monumental in age and gravitas, with "the density, the compactness of stone" (Desai 37) — situates him as a near-mythic figure, the living incarnation of a literary tradition rooted in aristocratic refinement and cultural prestige. In this moment, Nur embodies Urdu's aura of transcendence, a "godlike magnitude" (Desai 38) that demanded reverence and devotion rather than flattery. For Deven, meeting Nur for the first time is akin to a religious epiphany, as if he were being lifted from his "mean, disordered and hopeless" existence into the higher realm of poetry, beauty, and illumination (Desai 42–43). However, Desai quickly dismantles this aura of grandeur, revealing the unmistakable signs of a deeper physical and existential decline. Nur's once-majestic body, now ravaged by age and neglect, serves as a potent metaphor for the fading glory of Muslim cultural heritage in India.

The body of Nur is not just aging but declining under the weight of cultural disillusionment. The pigeon-flying episode in the novel captures this bodily and symbolic degradation with cruel precision. In a grotesque inversion of traditional imagery where pigeons symbolize flight, inspiration, and poetry, the birds are shown seething around Nur, perching on his bald head and feasting upon him (Desai 45). The pigeons' rapaciousness mirrors the predatory world around Nur, where sycophants, opportunists, and family members slowly strip away the remnants of his dignity. Nur's bodily decrepitude—the broken voice, the decaying teeth, the physical frailty—becomes a concrete, almost grotesque symbol of cultural and masculine decline. Moreover, Nur's emasculation is exacerbated by his loss of control within his own domestic sphere. His wives, particularly Imtiaz Begum, subtly but decisively displace him from the center of cultural authority. Though the novel postpones a full confrontation with the question of women's

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agency for later, even brief glimpses into Nur's household reveal how his inability to command respect within his family parallels his collapse in the public domain. His relegation to a marginalized, almost pitiful figure during poetry readings, while his second wife commands the attention of the audience, serves as a visible sign of his emasculation.

This collapse of bodily vigor and domestic authority finds its echo in Nur's own bitter self-reflections. His lament, "I am surrounded by fools. Fools will follow me, pursue me and find me out and capture me so that in the end I myself will join their company" (Desai 35), extends beyond his personal frustration to capture the tragic fate of Urdu itself. Just as the poet is hemmed in by opportunistic hangers on who drain his vitality, exploit his reputation, and reduce him to spectacle, Urdu as a language finds itself encircled by forces that trivialize, commodify, and ultimately diminish its stature. This analogy illustrates Urdu's forced descent from a position of aristocratic grandeur – nurtured by emperors and nawabs – to one where it is compelled to share space with those who neither honour nor sustain it. Rather than receiving genuine patronage, it is entrapped within the very mediocrity it once transcended.

The erosion of masculine authority in *In Custody* is most visibly played out within the domestic sphere, where women expose and undermine the fading prestige of Urdu's male custodians. Nur's inability to assert power over his wives reflects the broader emasculation experienced by Urdu-speaking men in a Hindi-dominated, postcolonial India. His second wife, Imtiaz Begum, openly mocks his fallen stature, pointing dramatically at his diminished form and asking, "Do you call that a poet, or even a man?" (Desai 67). By occupying the center of literary gatherings and reciting her verses while Nur sits "huddled, ignored and uncelebrated," (Desai 86) Imtiaz symbolically usurps his cultural authority. Her loud, theatrical performances vulgarize what Urdu poetry once represented, transforming a tradition of refinement into a parody of itself. Imtiaz Bibi becomes not merely a personal adversary but a visible manifestation of the internal decay hollowing out Nur's culturally resonant, masculine identity. Even Deven, who otherwise venerates Urdu's heritage, instinctively sets aside the book of her poems she sends him, refusing to recognize her as a legitimate successor to the tradition. Meanwhile, Nur's first wife—neglected and embittered—serves as a living emblem of the poet's abandoned grandeur. Deven's growing realization that Nur's household has collapsed into a site of chaos, filled with opportunists and sycophants, reinforces the image of a failed patriarch unable to preserve dignity either personally or culturally. Through the disarray of Nur's domestic world, Desai poignantly illustrates how the custodians of Urdu and the forms of masculinity tied to its stewardship have been irrevocably diminished.

Outside the home, Nur's public standing also steadily disintegrates, as he passes into oblivion. His poetry readings, once celebrated events drawing genuine admirers, dwindle into spectacles attended largely by opportunists. Deven, once awe-struck, comes to see Nur surrounded not by dignified litterateurs but by

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"louts... lafangas of the bazaar world." Deven wonders in disillusionment, "What were these clowns and jokers and jugglers doing around him, or he with them?" (Desai 55). The dwindling number of attendees at Nur's poetry readings signifies the waning interest in Urdu, illustrating how Urdu has been receded to the margins, appreciated only as a relic of the past. The commercialization of these readings reflects the larger trend of cultural dilution, where Urdu is no longer valued for its inherent beauty but rather for the nostalgia it evokes. During these readings, Nur's inability to command attention or deliver his verses with the same vigor as before mirrors the fading impact of Urdu poetry itself. His slurred recitations, overshadowed by his physical frailty and mental exhaustion, serve as a poignant metaphor for the slow death of Urdu in modern India. Desai further accentuates Nur's repeated demands for financial assistance—for cataract surgery and pilgrimage funds—reflecting his dependence and loss of masculine autonomy. His greatness is undermined by his begging, as he becomes a burden rather than a beacon. His reliance on Deven to preserve his poetry further subverts traditional patriarchal dynamics, with cultural authority ceded to an increasingly reluctant custodian. Deven recognizes, in despair, that he is entrapped, "He who had set out to hunt Nur down was being hunted down himself, the prey" (Desai 166). In the novel, Nur's decrepitude is not merely a personal failure but a symptom of a much larger historical and cultural disintegration, wherein Muslim identity, once proud and refined, has been consigned to irrelevance, nostalgia, and decay. His ultimate fate, trapped within the ruins of his home and his own body condemned instead to witness its slow, painful extinction:

> My body no more than a reed pen cut by the sword's tip,
> Useless and dry till dipped in the ink of life's blood. (Desai 42)

Nur's poetry, once a tool of creative exuberance, becomes a symbol of inertia. His verses, steeped in longing and nostalgia, fail to resonate with a society that has moved on. The beauty of his poetry contrasts sharply with the harsh realities of his present life, highlighting the disconnection between past glory and current disillusionment.

V

While Nur's figure reveals the exhaustion of the Urdu poetic tradition, Murad's illustrates how its legacy is negotiated in the contemporary literary sphere. Murad, as the editor of *Awaaz*, assumes the position of a custodian of Urdu, yet his custodianship is marked by hollowness and opportunism rather than genuine commitment. Under the garb of a revivalist eager to preserve Urdu literary culture, Murad soon reveals a more cynical agenda driven by self-preservation and commercial gain. He is fully aware of the language's decline and acknowledges that his magazine survives on minimal readership (Desai 8). He poses as a benefactor of the language by planning a special issue on Urdu poetry with the intention that, "Someone has to keep alive the glorious tradition of Urdu literature. If we do not do it, at whatever cost, how will it survive in this era of – that

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vegetarian monster, Hindi?" (Desai 8). This metaphor of Hindi as the "vegetarian monster" reveals Murad's disdain for Hindi language and his nostalgic clinging to Urdu's aristocratic past as "the language of the court in days of royalty" (Desai 8). Yet, despite his rhetorical valorization of Urdu, Murad's actions betray little genuine commitment to the language's survival or cultural spirit. Even as he bemoans the fate of Urdu, he instrumentalizes its decline as a means of self-aggrandizement. Moreover, Murad's editorial venture is hardly the palace he imagines Urdu deserves; instead, it is run from the premises of "K.K. Sahay & Sons, Printers and Publishers since 1935" (Desai 29). The description of the shabby condition of his office, spilling out onto a balcony with "files and bundles of magazine stacked high against the railing" (Desai 29) refers to a chaotic space, which further determines the condition of Urdu language in literary scenario. He manipulates Deven into undertaking the interview with Nur under the guise of friendship, only to abandon him when complications arise, refusing to accept any responsibility for the logistical failures of the recording session. Murad's deceit and refusal to acknowledge his own role in the fiasco underscore a deeper moral decay. Thus, Murad's revivalist posturing collapses under the weight of material marginality and ideological inconsistency. His impassioned speeches serve less to revive Urdu than to mask the decaying infrastructure and fading influence of a once-regal language. What Desai lays bare through Murad is a disenchanted figure, performing the authority of tradition even as he navigates its institutional obsolescence.

The propensity for institutionalized decay of both Urdu culture and Muslim masculinity is best embodied in Abid Siddiqui, the head of the Urdu Department at Lala Ram Lal College. Desai introduces Siddiqui with a striking physical image: "a small man having a youthful face that is adorned with a prematurely tuft of white hair", seemingly suspended between vitality and decline. This premature aging signals not only Siddiqui's personal fading but also the dying state of the cultural ethos he represents. Though Deven had known Siddiqui merely as a bachelor who remained the guardian of his ancestral home—his visit to Siddiqui's *haveli* reveals an unexpected side: Siddiqui is "released from his usual university self – neat, trim and circumspect – now transformed into a hedonist, a sybarite, a connoisseur of music and food and even a gambler" (Desai 157). His once grand, now decaying ancestral house, with its broken cane chairs and faded grandeur, acts as a powerful metaphor for the collapse not only of Urdu's cultural prestige but also of the masculine authority historically tied to intellectual and linguistic stewardship. Deven feels "vaguely pleased and relieved" (Desai 150) at the tattered state of Siddiqui's world, sensing in its erosion a reflection of the broader cultural decline. Although Siddiqui assists Deven in procuring financial assistance for his recording project, Deven bitterly realizes that Siddiqui, once anchored in cultural privilege and scholarly prestige, has atrophied into passive complacency. Rather than actively resisting Urdu's marginalization, Siddiqui embodies its institutional abandonment, prioritizing self-preservation and personal comfort over any

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meaningful cultural action. His yearning for the old-world surfaces in his nostalgic remark that within the walled city, "the Urdu spoken is chaste, unlike the yokel dialect one hears" (Desai 153), but his retreat into memory is a hollow refuge, disconnected from any effort to reclaim relevance. In this sense, Siddiqui is not merely an inefficient bureaucrat but a symptom of a deeper historical wound: the severance of language from vitality, and masculinity from cultural legitimacy. His emasculation is not dramatized through overt humiliation but through the slow disintegration of dignity into resignation and irrelevance.

The cultural emasculation of Urdu's custodian's invites reading as a case of "gendered nostalgia", where the longing for linguistic and cultural authority exposes not only the absence of that order in the present but also the inability of men to recover it. As Rebekka Friedman and Hannah Partis-Jennings argue, nostalgia is not just memory but a "past-oriented emotional experience" that renders the present "diminished" in relation to an idealized past (328). In Desai's novel, Nur's vision of Urdu as a "corpse" and his bitter comparison of Hindi's flourishing with Urdu's decay exemplify such nostalgia. His longing for Urdu's aristocratic heyday is part of cultural memory that is essentially gendered, since Urdu had historically conferred prestige and authority on Muslim men. Megan MacKenzie and Alana Foster's notion of "masculinity nostalgia," a yearning for secure, traditional gender roles in the face of humiliation and displacement (206), sharpens this reading: Urdu's marginalization strips men like Nur and Siddiqui of the authority to embody hegemonic masculinity. What remains is a non-hegemonic masculinity bound up with loss, dependency, and self-doubt.

Against this broader backdrop of decline, the novel also foregrounds Deven Sharma whose personal trajectory brings Urdu's crisis into sharper focus. His enduring passion lies in the classical tradition of Urdu poetry, a love deeply rooted in his early childhood when Urdu was the language of his domestic environment. Hailing from Lucknow and later educated in Delhi, Deven belongs to a modest background, who later secures a position at the provincial Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore. His professional choice is less a reflection of personal ambition than of economic pragmatism, dictated by the post-independence linguistic hierarchy that elevated Hindi as the dominant language of administration and opportunity across North India. While Hindi sustains his corporeal needs, it is Urdu that animates his inner world (Desai 43). Trapped within the dull confines of provincial life, Deven finds a momentary escape when Murad, a childhood acquaintance, offers him a chance to reconnect with the cultural vitality of the capital. Agreeing to Murad's proposition, Deven momentarily liberates himself from the suffocating stasis of Mirpore, a town that had come to symbolize for him the "impassable desert" separating him from the vanished splendour of intellectual companionship, artistic stimulation, and broader life possibilities (Desai 24).

Deven's journey toward meeting Nur, the once-great Urdu poet, is framed through a bleak, desolate landscape: "He stared out at the white dust and the yellow weeds, the leafless thorn trees, the broken fences, isolated tin and brick shacks and the

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scattered carcasses of cattle that littered the landscape" (Desai 22). This desolation becomes an extended metaphor for the condition of Urdu itself —just as Deven's physical journey is barren and arduous, so too is his effort to revive a dying literary tradition, struggling against forces of cultural decay far beyond his control. His status as a Hindu attempting to rescue Urdu—the emblem of Muslim aristocratic culture—heightens the tragic irony: whereas the original custodians like Nur, Murad, and Siddiqui, have either succumbed to decay or turned opportunistic, an outsider bears the burden of preserving the dying tradition. Though his project of preserving Urdu collapses under institutional neglect, Deven ultimately embraces the role of "custodian," which turns into a burdensome commitment in a world marked by loss and decay.

VI

Deven's unrelenting efforts to 'rescue' Urdu from oblivion mirror the efforts of a range of stakeholders in newly independent India. In the aftermath of Partition, when Urdu began to be systematically marginalized in India, several important initiatives were taken by various individuals and organizations to revive and protect the language. Despite the political, cultural, and institutional obstacles, Urdu remained a vibrant site of cultural memory and contestation. Muslim petitioners from organizations such as the *Anjuman-Taraqqi-e-Urdu* defended Urdu as an indigenous language, rejecting claims of its foreignness and hybridity (Umar 181). Prominent Muslim leaders and a few sympathetic Hindu figures challenged the growing communal rhetoric that branded Urdu as "foreign" and insisted that Urdu's historical evolution in India, particularly in regions like Uttar Pradesh, made it an indigenous language that deserved constitutional protection. Even when Urdu was institutionally marginalized, writers, poets, and cultural activists continued kept its memory alive in pamphlets, newspapers, literary societies, and cultural gatherings.

Desai, drawing from her own experiences of growing up in Old Delhi, sought to preserve the memory of a time when Urdu poetry and its cultural presence enriched the city's life (Guignery and Tadie370–71). In one of her interviews, Desai eloquently articulates her concern about the dwindling audience for Urdu poetry and the effort needed to preserve the language amidst its decline (Guignery and Tadie 372). One such instance is reflected in *In Custody*, where Lala Ram Lal College—though modest and peripheral—offered Urdu as a subject at a time when it was nearing extinction. The establishment of the Urdu Department at Lala Ram Lal was itself an act of reclamation: funded by the descendants of a nawab who had fled Delhi after the 1857 revolt, the department was intended to honor the family's lost legacy without publicly attaching their name. Their aim was not mere commemoration but the active preservation of a cultural and linguistic heritage that was destined to vanish. However, Desai reveals that mere survival through institutional remnants is not enough. Nur Shahjehanabadi voices a more impassioned and masculine vision for Urdu's revival. For him, the reclamation of Urdu demands a vigorous, combative energy, a return to a lost vitality that once

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marked its power, *"*We need the roar of lions, or the boom of cannon, so that we can march upon these Hindiwallahs and make them run. Let them see the power of Urdu*"* (Desai 52). But this rhetorical militancy is mocked as hollow bravado, for his "claws have been extracted and his teeth filed" (Desai 52). The young men dismiss him as laughable, calling Urdu itself as emasculated – "Here we live as hijras, as eunuchs" (Desai 52).

The peripheralization of Urdu in the novel represents not only a linguistic defeat but also a deeper cultural and psychological crisis of masculinity. The disempowerment of Urdu-speaking Muslim men is not just the result of state policy or nationalist narratives—it is also enabled by internal decay, failed solidarities, and gendered exclusions. *In Custody*, thus, is not simply a novel mourning the extinction of a literary culture—it is about the slow, painful waning of the masculine ideals that once sustained it. Desai's narrative brings these larger structures of loss, exclusion, and othering into the intimate realm of bodies, relationships, and crumbling cityscapes. Each male figure, in his own way, powerfully embodies the idea of linguistic decline, and with it, a model of masculinity that is increasingly obsolete, unmoored, and fragile in postcolonial India. In *In Custody* (1984), Urdu no longer functions as a unifying cultural force—it becomes a site of burden, nostalgia, and contestation. Concomitantly, the transforming masculine prototypes are caught in the crosscurrents of linguistic, political, and cultural upheaval.

[i] *Khari Boli*, a dialect spoken in the areas of Western U.P., Delhi, and Haryana, became the linguistic foundation of modern standard Hindi and Urdu, and gradually displaced Braj and Awadhi in poetic and literary expression, while also serving as a medium of everyday speech. For a detailed discussion, see Sheldon Pollock's *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (2003), pp. 959–999.

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