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Toxic Masculinity in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

Yousma Sajad¹, 7th Semester, Integrated English, Amar Singh College, Cluster University, Srinagar

Ribqah Sajad², 2nd Semester, Integrated English, Amar Singh College, Cluster University, Srinagar

Correspondence address: Yousma Sajad Salati, Lane 2, Bulbulbagh, Barzulla, Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir

Abstract:

Toxic masculinity is a definition of manhood that is based on the idea that men need to be dominant and violent. Manhood according to this perspective means being physically powerful, sexually aggressive, and showing your worth by dominating others. A man defined by this definition suppresses his emotions, has an aversion to emotional connection and physical affection, and rejects anything remotely feminine as weak and inferior. The impacts of toxic masculinity are far-reaching. Specifically, it can lead to more violence against women, since men may believe that they are entitled to do whatever they want. Men are also adversely affected by toxic masculinity. Studies have shown that men who exhibit traits of toxic masculinity are more likely to suffer isolation, poor health, and unhappiness (Pohl). Anita Desai is one of the most prolific authors of Indian fiction in English. Her fiction deals with themes of feminine sensationalism, drudgery, and misery experienced by women. Focusing on the subtle images of tormented, tortured, toiled, trodden and self-frustrated women, she places great emphasis on the inner heart, soul and mind of each character. Through her novels, she explores alienation, isolation, family relationships, marital discord, and domestic violence (Meena). Keeping all these points in mind, the article intends to study toxic masculinity in Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*, which was also later adapted as a film. Although focused on the deterioration and attempt to preserve the dying language -Urdu, the novel is filled with instances where toxic masculinity is painfully apparent and calling to be pointed out. The effects thereof on Deven and Nur, and their wives Sarla and Intiaz Begum will be our main concern of study. The psychological defense mechanism of displacement will also be discussed in brief, with regards to Deven displacing his aggression towards his wife, Sarla who he considers is his subordinate due to his misogynistic thinking.

Keywords: Toxic masculinity, dominance, subjugation, silencing, gender inequality

The concept of toxic masculinity focuses on certain traditional masculine ideal behaviors that may harm men, women, and society in general; it does not condemn men or male attributes, but rather emphasizes the detrimental effects of conforming to certain traditional masculine ideal behaviors such as dominance, self-reliance, and competition. Toxic masculinity is consequently defined as adhering to traditional male gender roles which stigmatize emotions boys and men are permitted to express while elevating other emotions such as anger. Terry Kupers describes toxic masculinity as involving "the need to aggressively compete and dominate others" (Kupers). The American Psychological Association has warned that "traditional masculinity ideology" is associated with negative effects on mental and physical health (Salam, Maya), (Fortin, Jacey). Men who adhere to traditionally masculine cultural norms, including risk-taking, violence, dominance, work as the primary priority, need for emotional control, and desire to win, are more likely to experience psychological problems such as depression, stress, body image problems, substance abuse, and poor social functioning. This model of manhood is also a key element of rape culture.

The social capital of patriarchal societies like ours is masculinity. The more toxic masculine a man is, the more social acceptance, privilege, and power he enjoys. As a result, to prove their worth and inclusion, men must constantly display their masculinity for each other. In environments that are all or mostly male, this constant performance causes toxic qualities to become more amplified and entrenched. Several studies show that men who belong to fraternities, play team sports, or work for the military or in law enforcement are more likely to hold misogynistic views, as well as commit gendered violence like assault and domestic abuse.

Some men can often feel lost and confused about how they should act because of the different expectations that are associated with being a man. Toxic masculinity has clear social impacts when examining rates of violence, drug-related crime, antisocial behaviors, overdoses, and

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suicides. The lack of accountability in rehab is also significantly linked to toxic masculinity. Traits of toxic or unhealthy masculinity can include:

- Unconditional physical toughness
- Physical aggression, fear of emotions
- Discrimination against people that isn't heterosexual
- Hyper independence
- Sexual aggression or violence
- Anti-feminist behavior (Greenhillrecovery.com)

People fighting for gender equality have long understood that men themselves must solve the issues of toxic masculinity. Until social acceptance for men is dependent on performing their masculinity, solutions that come from women will never reach the most obstinate offenders, who, by definition, reject all things feminine as inferior. Male allies need to fill this role because these men aren't open to hearing what women have to say, but are conditioned to conform to the expectations of the men around them. By embodying and modeling healthy masculinity, which is better for men as well as the cultures they inhabit, male allies can combat the hegemony of toxic masculinity in our culture. Healthy masculinity means being honest with yourself about your own needs and desires, as well as treating all others as you would like to be treated. It is also about not using size, strength, or power to control others. In contrast, healthy masculinity allows men to express more feelings and to share them with others; It allows men to suffer from deep love and affection, both socially and romantically.

Healthy masculinity also allows men to:

- Accept their bodies even if they're not perfectly muscular and sculpted
- Treat women and girls with the same thoughtfulness with which they like to be treated
- Use their privilege as men to advocate for women and others
- Create and maintain friendships
- Develop as emotionally available caretakers and parents to both boys and girls
- Accept that anger is no excuse for violence or abuse
- Experience and enjoy touch and affection with other men
- Create instead of destroy (El Carabelo)

No man is exempt from the insidious nature of toxic masculinity. Almost every man is exposed to toxic masculinity to some degree, depending on their family, friends, and community, as well as the messages they are exposed to in popular media. The decision to engage in toxic masculinity or bring down the toxic notion is up to each individual man.

Anita Desai stated her initial intention of not including women characters in this novel in one of her interviews:

"I thought I would try to write without any female characters, but it proved impossible. I could hear them screaming in the background, banging on the doors, being very hysterical." I asked myself, "Why have I made all these women so awful?" and I thought, "Well, if that was the house they were made to live, they would probably be awful." (Costa, Magda)

As Deven illustrates in the narrative through his perspective, the women inhabiting the world of *In Custody* are not only stifled by patriarchal discourse but are literally defined by it. The household work is the responsibility of Deven's wife Sarla alone, and so is the upbringing of their son, Manu. Deven just has to bring in income to the house, and does not even think of lending a helping hand to his wife in the household chores or in the day to day routine of his son. When Sarla finds her husband, Deven, resting immobile on a chair while she labours away at the household chores, she thinks grumpily:

"It was only men who could play at being dead while still alive; such idleness was luxury in her opinion. Now if she were to start playing such tricks, where would they all be? Who would take Manu to school and cook lunch for them?" (p.139)

Not only did Deven have the privilege of coming home like a paying guest would, he could even vent away his frustrations at Sarla. As a breadwinner, he recognized that his contribution was inadequate, and the realization that his wife knew about his failure made him defensive, leading him to resort to patriarchal displays of power that are passed on through generations of toxic masculinity:

"Usually, he was enraged by her tacit accusations that added to the load on his back. To relieve it, he would hurl away dishes that had not been cooked to his liking, bawl

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uncontrollably if meals were not ready when he wanted them or the laundry not done or a button missing or their small son noisy or unwashed; it was to lay the blame upon her, remove its clinging skin from him. Tearing up a shirt she had not washed, or turning the boy out of the room because he was crying, he was really protesting against her disappointment; he was out to wreck it, take his revenge upon her for harbouring it. Why should it blight his existence that had once shown promise and had future?"(p.68)

Neglected by his peers and thwarted in his poetic fantasies, Deven only has Sarla to vent all his frustrations at. He misses no opportunity to assert his authority over her. Deven clearly displaces his aggression towards Sarla, who has been rendered powerless against him due to the patriarchal social construct. Displacement is a psychological defense mechanism in which a person redirects a negative emotion from its original source to a less threatening recipient. He gloats in the realization that, as his wife, she lives peacefully in his house only because of his arbitration and he pretends to hate the presents that his in-laws send him for the sake of placating him and ensuring the well-being of their daughter.:

"He had tossed it (the shirt) on to the floor in an obligatory fit of temper – the meek are not always mild – saying the colour was one he detested, that the buttons did not match, that the size was too large – how could they have chosen such a cheap garment for their son-in-law." (p.18)

Sarla, on the other hand, had no outlets to vent out her frustrations through; she never spoke back to Deven, considering the age old misogynistic rule that a wife is supposed to respect her husband no matter what he does. She instead either screamed and abused in the kitchen or depended on the silent treatment. The silent treatment is a refusal to communicate verbally with another person. People who use the silent treatment may even refuse to acknowledge the presence of the other person. In general, the silent treatment "is a way to try and inflict emotional pain on someone as a consequence of feelings of anger or frustration," It is also considered a form of abuse – emotional abuse:

"Sarlar never lifted her voice in his presence — countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only

when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain. Her other method of defense was to go into the bed room and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy."(p158, 159)

Sarlahad dreamt of a marriage filled with love and harmony, looking through magazines filled with advertisements of products showcased by happy women. Though her marriage to Deven was an arranged one, she longed to fulfill those dreams. Indulging in self-pity or frustration is an unnecessary luxury, because her life is yet to be lived, and she is trying to fashion her dream world through every little joy that reality brings her way. The moment she observes her husband lavishing affection upon their little boy, and then walking out hand-in-hand with the child's tiny forefinger still firmly clutched in his fist, she is filled with awe and, for a brief, fleeting moment, she feels at one with her son. "...coming as close to that mother in the glossy magazine as she was ever likely to come." (p.71)

While both sexes are portrayed as suffering from the yoke of marriage, men, accustomed to satiety, are free to react to their dissatisfaction, while women are ostracized by it. Even though he understands Sarla's disappointment and the unfulfilled desires and dream she has, he's incapable of empathizing with her.

"He understood because, like her, he had been defeated too; like her, he was a victim. Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship....A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer." (p.68)

By presenting both Nur and Deven's families, the novel succinctly highlights the family as a site of female exploitation. Both these households have wives who live physically, materially and emotionally poorly. Families in both of these households have women struggling with financial responsibilities and economic hurdles, while the men spin fantasies and are frustrated at their unfulfilled fantasies. Patriarchy does not only exploit wedded wives who cook and slave for their husbands without acknowledging their indispensable help, it monitors women so closely that their labor extends even beyond the confines of conjugality, even they become widowed. In making her women silent and writing about them from a male viewpoint, Desai exposes the ways in which women

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are defined in terms of male desires and exploited physically, emotionally, philosophically, and verbally to serve their purposes.

Desai's *In Custody* poignantly reminds us that even the most compelling voices can be muffled under the all-pervading layers of patriarchy. Imtiaz Begum, Nur's second wife, represents one such assertive voice that has remained unacknowledged despite its dissenting assertion. Imtiaz Begum, a dancing house prostitute only valued for her body but renowned for her singing skills, gets a seat in Nur's heart and home through her budding poetic skills. The blooming poet flourishes under the tutelage of the great master and over the years establishes a reputation as a poet, but it is the person she is more than the poems she writes that inspires the visitors. She is first introduced to Deven and the readers on the day of her birthday, reciting her recent collection of poems to a mehfil and Deven's first reaction to her is one of loathing, owing to his expectation that it would be a gathering in honor of his hero Nur, and is shocked by the poet's marginalized presence on the scene. As soon as she begins reciting, Deven decides that he isn't going to listen to her verse, and when he listens to it, he does so with reservations and a preconceived mindset. The lyrics she sings describe her caged existence, resonating with the very thoughts which are in Deven's mind, but she elicits no empathy or understanding from him, only a feeling of profound hatred. Despite Imtiaz Begum's poetry being undeniably excellent, portraying, as one realizes, her womanly life of servitude, while the other members of the audience are visibly moved, Deven is left feeling cold and indifferent as a result of his prejudice. To him, she is nothing more than a monkey, mechanically practicing the tricks she has learned from Nur, a belief that is instilled in Nur's heart as well. Nur accuses her of stealing his literary jewels, his admirers, his fame and even his poetic space:

"...she wanted my house, my audience, my friends. she raided my house, stole my jewels – those are what she wears now as she sits before an audience, showing them off as her own."(p.89)

In Nur's view, her birthday celebration is odious - a sign of approaching death that every passing year signifies:

"Birthdays. I thought we had done with celebrating them, with the setting up of gravestones along the paths of

life....But the vanity of women....No chance to gather garlands, gifts, applause, attention can be passed by you see. Not even the occasion of setting up of another gravestone." (p.88)

Nevertheless, when Deven returns a few weeks later to find Imtiaz Begum very sick, Nur's attitude toward her completely changes, a change that even Deven finds astounding. Although Nur may view her as weak, he still finds her to be lovable, and even right in her thoughts and actions. Birthday celebrations cease to be an act of vanity now and take on the character of a performance that has severely strained its performer and has superstitiously cratered her mental and physical wellbeing:

"You see what has come of that mistaken celebration we had for her birthday? I did not want it all – I am superstitious – but she insisted – and it proved too much for her. She is not strong, you see. She never was strong, and she breaks easily – under strain." (p.119).

Imtiaz Begum's illness, whether real or feigned, allows her to play the stereotypical role of the weak woman, who depends on her husband for physical and emotional support as well as her very existence, identity and existence. Therefore, by placing her among ordinary women and gaining relief from her deteriorating voice, Nur feels less threatened and is thus free to accept her affections toward him, a weak woman punished for her imprudence in disobeying her husband's wishes. Desai does not offer us any glimpse into Imtiaz Begum's mind at any point throughout the novel. In *Custody*, she is the most defiant of all the female characters, and thus the most objectified and subaltern - by both men and women alike. So, for attempting to transgress her limits rather than being content with her lot, she is considered a sinner by Nur's elder wife. It is pertinent to note that Imtiaz Begum isn't just favoured by Nur just because of her youth, but because she has given him a male child, while he had only daughters through his first wife.

The only occasion when she powerfully voices herself is in her letter to Deven, where she demands to be respected for what she is and not what Nur or his admirers portray her to be. Strangely, her letter seems to place her in an entirely new perspective, as she has so far been spoken for, judged, and condemned by the male world. The painted and powdered dancer, with her stolen poetic jewels clearly on display that she shows off cleverly, is suddenly taken

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out of this patriarchal mould and is forced to find her own clear voice, a transformation that overwhelms and exhausts Deven:

“The elegance and floridity of her Urdu entered Deven’s ears like a flourish of trumpets and beat at his temples while he read. The essential, unsuspected spirit of the woman appeared to step free of its covering, all the tinsel and gauze and tawdriness, and reveal a face from which the paint and powder had been washed and which wore an expression that made Deven halt and stumble before he could read on.” (p.215)

In a letter to Deven near the end of the novel, Desai reveals the young wife's point of view. In the letter, the woman explains that Nur chose to marry her due to her "gifts and abilities," not because of sexual entrapment as had been assumed that was the case throughout the novel. To prove her worth, she, paradoxically, employs the same arguments that Deven had used to convince himself that she was unworthy. Deven was insulting Nur implicitly when he viewed Nur's wife as a common dancer and denied that she had any merit. The great Nur would have made her his wife, had her poetry lacked poetic quality, on account of her vulgar past existence. She had no education other than what she had seized for herself, so how could it be her fault if her poetry did not match that of Nur. The voice he had condescendingly relegated to the margins, enslaving it in stereotypes, had now made itself heard and mocked him for his complacency. She challenges him to read the Urdu poetry enclosed in the envelope, and the intent of the poetry is to shake up his mental world.

“Let me see if you are strong enough to face them and admit to their merit. Or if they fill you with fear and insecurity because they threaten you with danger – danger that your superiority to women may become questionable.” (p.216)

Her letter is an indictment of male chauvinism and toxic masculinity, in which she hammers at not only Deven but the patriarchal system as a whole:

“Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement, while I, because I was born female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected? Is it not you who has made me play the role of the loose woman in

gaudy garments by refusing to take my work seriously and giving me just that much regard that you would extend to even a failure in the arts as long as the artist was male?” (p.217)

However, Deven lacks the courage to confront her challenge, to negotiate with her self-formulated presence and her individualistic feminist voice.

“He did not have the will or the wherewithal to deal with this new presence, one he had been happy to ignore earlier and relegate to the grotesque world of hysterics, termagants, viragos, the demented and the outcast.” (p.217)

Deven's timidity prevents her from becoming recognized in the world of Urdu poetry through her defiant letter. Frightened of having to "enter that world on a mission of mercy or rescue," he tears up her poems. However, her angry statements make the reader reevaluate what they previously had only seen through the eyes of a male character. Desai subverts her book's portrayal of women which, in fact, is Deven's perception, not her own, by making women's frustrations understandable.

CONCLUSION

Studying the family of Deven, we find the entire environment toxic. The little boy, Manu grows up seeing his father lashing out on his mother to vent out his own frustrations and clearly seeing her as inferior to him just because he is a male and she a female. The imprints of toxic masculinity that are embedded into the child from his early childhood are sure to leave a long lasting effect. Had his father treated his mother with love and respect, he would learn to do the same. As such, the boy will grow up thinking of females as his inferior, and marriage as a toxic cage. Although Sarla is the victim of toxic masculinity through Deven, we've seen in the novel that she resorts to using the silent treatment in which the child also goes through mental trauma. It all comes down to passing on toxic masculinity and trauma from one generation to another, instead of working to achieve mental peace by creating an environment of peace and harmony instead of toxicity, which again has been learnt from the previous generations and peers.

Nur's first wife shows how patriarchy is deeply enrooted into not just the misogynistic men, but women as well. Instead of showing compassion and support to a

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fellow woman – Imtiaz Begum, she considers her to be a sinner for trying to set up her own individuality and thus, crossing the boundaries set by the patriarchal society.

Using the consciousness of Deven, Desai articulates the male conception of frustrated womanhood and the stereotypical moulds in which these women are viewed - hysteric, termagant, virago and outcast. Aberrant women are considered difficult and are cast into these roles in the patriarchal world, their voices rubbed out, while compliant women are allowed in as they bear the badge of silence. Desai states that her novel is about:

“...how life is like for men, how different it is from the life of women.”“...I wanted to show how much easier it is for a man to live this life; how much harder it is for a woman’s words to be taken seriously, or even have the time, the space and the privacy...”(Costa, Magda)

Although almost all of the action in the novel revolves around the issue of voicing - of linguistic, cultural, and poetic voices, it is ironic that the female voices are deliberately muted, silenced, suppressed. A language and culture is a woman’s as much as it is a man’s; considering it to be a male domain is just another way in which toxic masculinity shows its effects. Hence, embodying healthy masculinity is beneficial for everyone - men, women, children as well as the society and culture.

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