In Custody

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANITA DESAI

Born to a Bengali father and a German mother in the hill station of Mussoorie, Anita Desai grew up in New Delhi, where she learned German and Bengali at home, Hindi and Urdu in the streets, and English in school. She began writing stories at just seven years old—she even illustrated them and learned to bind them together into books, which she gave to her family members as gifts. Her earliest and strongest literary influences were mainly Western novelists like Virginia Woolf and Henry James—she has cited Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* as one of her favorite books as a child. Desai also remembers how Old Delhi rioted and many of her schoolmates left as refugees when India and Pakistan became separate, independent nations in the Partition of 1947. She studied English literature at the University of Delhi and graduated in 1957. The next year, she moved to Kolkata, married the businessman Ashvin Desai, and co-founded the Writers Workshop publishing company with several other Indian authors. She began publishing novels in the early 1960s and has not stopped since. But her most productive period was between 1974 and 1984, when she published eight novels—including her autobiographical 1980 novel *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody*, which were both finalists for the prestigious Booker Prize and launched her to international prominence. In fact, she was a finalist for the prize a third time in 1999 for *Fasting, Feasting*; because the jury was bitterly divided over whether to award the prize to Desai or to its eventual winner, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, it took the unusual step of naming *Fasting, Feasting* as a runner-up. Desai has also won India's two highest literary awards, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship, as well as its third-highest award for civilians in general, the Padma Bhushan. In addition to the Indian cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chandigarh, and Pune, Desai has also lived in England, the U.S., and Mexico. Since the 1990s, she has taught at several universities in the northeastern United States (most recently M.I.T.). Her daughter Kiran Desai is also a noted novelist best known for *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *In Custody* is set in the early 1980s, the novel is deeply concerned with the long sweep of Indian history—and particularly whether modernizing, independent India will embrace or turn its back on its centuries-old Persian and Islamic traditions. Desai's characters confront this question through the lens of the slowly disappearing Urdu language; Urdu originated as a mixture of local dialects and Persian and was India's official language for over 600 years under the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) and the Mughal Empire (1526–1857). The 17th-century Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, who is best known for building the Taj Mahal, was responsible for planning much of Old Delhi—including the neighborhoods around Chandni Chowk and the Jama Masjid where much of *In Custody* is set. In fact, this area is still called Shahjahanabad, and in the novel, the poet Nur's full name is Nur Shahjahanabadi (which roughly translates to "the light of the city of Shah Jahan"). Under British rule, Urdu later became India's official language, as it was already a primary language among the city's political and cultural elite. However, in the 1880s, Hindus began agitating for a different dialect, Hindi, to be made official—and it was, alongside Urdu, in 1900. When the British finally left India after World War Two, they partitioned the country in two, with the majority of the country remaining secular India and a minority becoming Pakistan (which eventually became an Islamic republic). This created one of the world's gravest refugee crises, as more than 10 million of people migrated across the border in both directions. In particular, most of Delhi's Urdu-speaking Muslims left for Pakistan. Hindi and English became India's primary languages, and while Urdu remained official in many states, it has become marginalized—along with its traditional culture, which is largely centered on Old Delhi.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Anita Desai has published more than a dozen novels on a variety of subjects since the 1960s. Her early work—like *Cry, The Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), and Where *Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975)—focused largely on the inner lives of young Indian women struggling against traditional gender roles. In the middle period of her career, she started to write about Indian history and society more broadly. This period includes *Clear Light of Day* (1980), a largely autobiographical novel about coming of age in the era of India's partition, as well as *In Custody*. These novels, which were both finalists for the Booker Prize, launched Desai to international fame. Her other most popular from this period was *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), which follows a German Jewish man living in India. Finally, many of Desai's recent novels focus on immigration and diaspora. For instance, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) follows an Indian family that sends its favorite son to university in the U.S. and *The Zigzag Way* (2004) is about an American writer who moves to Mexico. Desai has also written several books for children and young adults, of which the most notable is *The Village by the Sea* (1982), as well as short story collections, including *Diamond Dust, and Other Stories* (2000) and *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011). Desai's daughter Kiran Desai is also a prominent

writer: her first novel is *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), but she is far better known for her second, the Booker Prize-winning *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Lastly, the novelist and screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, who grew up in the UK as the daughter of German Jewish refugees, then married an Indian architect and moved to Delhi, was Desai's neighbor and close friend. Her best-known novel is *Heat and Dust* (1975).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** In Custody
- **When Written:** Early 1980s
- **Where Written:** Mumbai, India
- **When Published:** October 8, 1984
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel, Indian Fiction, Postcolonial Fiction, Psychological Fiction
- **Setting:** Mirpore and Delhi, India
- **Climax:** Deven confronts Murad and then contemplates the nature of poetry in Old Delhi; in the final scene, Deven realizes that he is the "custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit."
- **Antagonist:** Nur, Sarla, Murad
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Film Adaptation. The prominent director Ismail Merchant adapted the *In Custody* into an award-winning 1993 film (*In Custody/Muhafiz*). Ironically, because Desai's novel is in English, the screenwriter had to translate the poet Nur's verses *into* Urdu—the language that he was supposed to be writing in all along.

Secret Identity. Anita Desai has admitted in an interview that the character of Nur is based on a real-life Urdu poet—but to avoid provocation and controversy, she refuses to say who it is.

PLOT SUMMARY

In Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*, the timid Hindi teacher Deven Sharma gets the opportunity of a lifetime when his brash childhood friend Murad hires him to interview his idol, the famous, elderly, reclusive Urdu poet Nur Shahjahanabadi. The novel opens with Murad paying Deven a surprise visit in Mirpore, the dusty, unremarkable town near Delhi where he lives and teaches. Over lunch, they discuss the decline of Urdu, which was once the language of India's royalty and literary elite, but has now been replaced by Hindi, the "language of peasants." They bonded over Urdu as young men and believe deeply in the cause of saving it—Murad's magazine Awaaz is dedicated to Urdu literature, and even though Deven teaches Hindi for practical reasons, his research focuses on the great Urdu poet Nur. Deven resents that Murad still hasn't paid him for his last few articles in *Awaaz*, but when Murad asks him to interview Nur for the next issue, he eagerly agrees.

Another day, Deven takes the bus to meet Murad in Delhi. Murad claims to be in a rush to see Nur, but he takes Deven to an electrician's shop instead, and then back to his office—which is really a tiny desk in the corner of a print shop. Murad sends his office boy to lead Deven into the chaotic, musty bowels of Old Delhi's Chandni Chowk market. They go to Nur's crumbling house, and Deven finds the bearded Nur lying on a couch upstairs, dressed in white, surrounded by tattered books. Deven explains that he's writing an article about Urdu poetry, but Nur declares that Urdu is already dead and Deven doesn't deserve its brilliance. Nur starts reciting one of his poems, and to his surprise, Deven continues the recitation. The poem was one of Deven's father's favorites.

Suddenly, a swarm of visitors shows up and start asking Nur for money, telling dirty jokes, and reciting their own second-rate poetry. A servant (Ali) whisks Nur away for a massage, bath, and change of clothes, and then he returns to entertain his guests. Deven is astonished to watch Nur drink glasses of rum and clumsily shove biryani and kebabs into his mouth while the crowd devolves into mindless, unoriginal chatter about Urdu, then starts throwing plates and glasses on the ground. When Nur drunkenly stumbles downstairs to wake up his son and make him sing, Deven follows him. He finds Nur lying face-down on a mattress while his wife Imtiaz stands over him, screaming that he wastes his time drinking instead of taking care of his family and writing poetry. Nur has vomited all over the floor; Imtiaz throws papers at Deven and demands that he clean it up. He agrees, then runs out to the street with the vomit-soaked paper, which he realizes has Nur's poetry on it.

Deven takes the morning bus back to Mirpore, where he decides to go straight to work. When he finally makes it home, his wife Sarla refuses to talk to him. She hates his feebleness and low salary, and he hates her negativity and simplemindedness; she copes with her resentment by ignoring him, and he by criticizing her cooking and cleaning. Deven spends the afternoon reading his young son Manu a book of animal fables and taking him on a walk through the neighborhood, down to a nearby canal. Deven decides that maybe his simple, boring life in Mirpore isn't so bad.

Then, Deven gets a postcard from Nur thanking him for "your decision to work as my secretary." Deven returns to Delhi to confront Murad, who is obviously responsible. Murad calls Deven ungrateful, disrespectful, and weak-willed—and tells him to go see Nur. Against his better judgment, Deven returns to Nur's house, where he joins a huge crowd assembling to watch a poetry recital. He is dismayed to see Imtiaz performing, not Nur. In the middle of the show, Nur stands up and walks out,

and Deven follows him. Upstairs, Nur lays on his couch, starts drinking, and complains that Imtiaz is betraying him by writing her own poetry. He explains that Deven can help him write down some old, unpublished poems, but he is "too broken and crushed" to do it today. Suddenly, Imtiaz arrives with her skirt full of rupee bills and mocks Nur for giving up on poetry. An elderly woman—Nur's first wife, Safiya—follows Imtiaz inside and attacks her. Deven runs out and returns to Murad's office, where Murad proposes that he **tape record** Nur's new poems instead of trying to write them all down.

Back in Mirpore, Deven meets his college's sole Urdu professor, Abid Siddiqui, at the reception after the annual board meeting. Deven proudly explains that he is interviewing Nur—and might even collect Nur's unpublished poems or write his biography. But Deven admits that he needs recording equipment, so Siddiqui slyly convinces the college registrar, Mr. Rai, to give him funding. In Delhi, Murad marches Deven into an electronics shop, where the owner, Mr. Jain, gives him a secondhand Japanese recorder and offers his nephew, Chiku, as "a technical assistant" to run it. Deven realizes that Jain and Murad have made a "shady deal," but he agrees anyway.

The next time Deven visits Nur, there is another massive crowd in the courtyard because Imtiaz is deathly ill. Deven explains his plan to record Nur's poetry, but Nur says it won't work because Imtiaz will overhear them. In her room, Imtiaz warns Nur against reciting poetry and declares that "**jackals** from universities" are trying to make a living off his work. For a third time, Deven panics and flees Nur's house unannounced. But on his way out, he meets Safiya, who claims that Imtiaz is faking her illness and explains that Deven must rent another space if he really wants to get his interview with Nur. She offers to help—for a price. But Deven doesn't have any money.

Back in Mirpore, Sarla criticizes Deven for his laziness and spending so much time in Delhi (as she thinks he's having an affair). Deven visits Siddiqui, who lives in a massive but decrepit estate, and they spend an evening drinking, discussing Urdu literature, and playing cards with Siddiqui's friends. Deven begs Siddiqui to help him rent a recording space, and Siddiqui mocks Deven's cowardliness, but agrees to help and secures more funding from Mr. Rai. Deven arranges to spend the summer interviewing Nur.

Safiya rents Deven a room in a brothel down the street from Nur's house. Deven and Chiku set up the recorder, and then Nur arrives—along with his posse of followers. They immediately start demanding food and drink. Deven panics and calls Murad, who reluctantly agrees to give him some cash. When the biryani and rum arrive, Nur finally starts reciting some poetry, but Chiku falls asleep and forgets to record it. Over the following weeks, Nur comes to the room every day, but he spends more time telling old stories and arguing with his followers than actually reciting his poetry. And whenever he *does* recite a poem, Chiku misses it. Deven assumes that Jain is paying Chiku, but then, Chiku starts demanding pay from *Deven* and threatening to quit. One day, Nur finally performs a new poem and even writes it down in Deven's notebook. But then, he walks out of the room, says he needs "primordial sleep," and never returns.

At Jain's shop, Deven finally listens to his recordings and realizes that they're mostly full of crackling sounds and laughter—but not Nur's voice. Jain sends another nephew, Pintu, to help Deven edit the recordings in Mirpore. But Pintu is just as lazy and incompetent as Chiku. One of Deven's students, Dhanu, does it instead with the help of some friends. Still, their master tape is just a "bizarre pastiche" of random clips of Nur's voice, and when Siddiqui hears it, he predicts that the college will fire Deven for wasting its money. Then, Pintu starts demanding payment, and Dhanu and his friends start demanding the top grades in Deven's class. Meanwhile, Nur starts sending Deven letters asking for money for medical treatments and a free education at Deven's college for his son. Deven and his bothersome colleague Jayadev discuss the death of the humanities and agree that they should have become scientists instead.

When Safiya mails him a 500-rupee bill for the brothel room, it's the last straw. Deven visits Delhi to demand his pay from Murad, but Murad refuses and offers to buy the tape of Nur's voice instead. Deven finally stands up for himself reminds Murad that the college owns the tapes. He spends the rest of the scorching, late-summer day wandering around Old Delhi, wondering whether poetry can still make a difference in modernizing India.

Back in Mirpore, Deven opens a lengthy letter from Imtiaz, who explains that she knew he was recording Nur the whole time. She includes several of her own poems for Deven to read—but predicts that he won't read them, since her success threatens his sense of male superiority. She is right: he doesn't read the poems.

Desperate to pay the brothel bill, Deven visits Siddiqui, who has just sold off his house but refuses to help. Nur sends Deven another letter asking for money, and Dhanu's friends threaten to kill him because he didn't inflate their grades. That night, unable to sleep, Deven walks down to the canal where he took Manu. Even if Nur has become a senile, desperate old man, Deven decides, he should remember Nur for his brilliant poetry and their brief moments of intellectual connection. Nur might have put Deven "in custody" through his debts, but in exchange, Deven has become "the custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit." Deven realizes that he has no choice but to fight for his job and the survival of poetry; suddenly emboldened, he turns around and runs home.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Deven Sharma – Deven Sharma, protagonist of *In Custody*, is a middle-aged Hindi teacher who lives in the small, dreary city of Mirpore, near his native Delhi. Meek, idealistic, and uninterested in wealth and status, his only true passion is Urdu poetry—and especially the work of Nur. But in independent India, Urdu is disappearing fast, and there are no jobs in it, which is why Deven teaches Hindi instead. Nobody will even publish his poems or his book on Nur—not even Murad, Deven's manipulative childhood friend who owns the literary magazine Awaaz and enlists Deven to interview Nur. When he actually meets Nur, Deven is astonished to realize that Nur is not the wise, pious elder that he imagined—instead, he is a miserable drunk who surrounds himself with superficial yes-men. While this leads Deven to reconsider his entire life and worldview, he remains dedicated to Nur's poetry and spends the whole book trying, in one way or another, to make a record of it. Deven is not a very good teacher, his salary is low, the college doesn't care about his department, he hates Mirpore, his marriage to Sarla is miserable, and he dedicates little time and energy to his son Manu. His only shot at scholarly success seems to be by interviewing Nur, publishing his new poems, or even writing his biography. But other characters thwart his attempts to do so at every turn. Murad convinces him to record Nur with a **tape recorder**, which turns out to be costly and useless; Nur's family keeps demanding money; and Nur refuses to recite his poetry when Deven asks. As a result, Deven ends up subject to everyone else's will—but entirely unable to assert his own. This helplessness is his defining character trait until the very end of the novel, when he finally manages to overcome it by realizing that he has become the "custodian of Nur's genius."

Murad – Deven's old friend Murad is the editor of the Urdu literary magazine Awaaz (which Murad's father, a wealthy Kashmiri carpet dealer, bought for him). In the first chapter, Murad visits Mirpore and asks Deven to write a feature about Nur. Throughout the rest of the book, he gives Deven terrible, contradictory directions for conducting his interview and manipulates him into chaotic, unpredictable situations that infuriate and bankrupt him. For instance, in Chapter Two, Murad claims to be in a rush to get to Nur's house—but then takes Deven along on a random errand, returns to his office, and sends Deven to Nur's house with his office boy instead. Later, he suggests **tape-recording** Nur, then guides Deven to Mr. Jain's shop, where Jain exploits Deven by selling him a poor-quality secondhand recorder and sending his nephew Chiku along to operate it (and eventually demand payment). Unsurprisingly, Murad never does any work or takes any responsibility for the havoc that he wreaks—on the contrary, he seems to actually enjoy Deven's suffering. In fact, Deven remembers this dynamic from their childhood, when Murad used to drive him crazy by sending him on pointless errands and making false promises. Deven's struggle to break out of his exploitative friendship with Murad is central to his growth as a character over the course of the novel—he finally does so at the end of Chapter Ten, when he refuses to sell Murad his tape of Nur's poetry. Throughout the novel, it's unclear how much of Murad's villainy is based on manipulation and how much on sheer recklessness—the reader never finds out how much Murad knows, or how far he's planning in advance. And even as he makes a living publishing traditional literature, Murad's scheming, double dealing, and profit seeking also represent the ethos of modernizing, capitalist India.

Nur – Nur Shahjahanabadi, the legendary Urdu poet whom Deven Sharma idolizes, is the central character in Desai's novel. While he is rumored to be a wise, reclusive ascetic, in reality, he is a bitter, sickly extrovert who spends his days getting drunk and gorging himself with a group of shallow lackeys who worship his every word, but don't truly understand his poetry. He suffers a long list of ailments that keep him essentially bedridden, but he doesn't look frail. In fact, Deven comments that "[Nur's] body had the density, the compactness of stone […] on account of age and experience." While he still retains his literary gifts, he spends far more time losing his train of thought, telling fragments of old stories, and praising the glory of rum and biryani than actually writing or reciting poetry. Perhaps worst of all, he is a vile person: he is harsh and unempathetic toward his family and Deven—any kindness he shows is really just empty hospitality, and his main goal is to squeeze as much money out of Deven as possible. Over several weeks of interviews, Nur gives Deven virtually no new material, and Deven struggles to reconcile his fantasies about Nur with the miserable man he has met. The sorry state of Nur's life and his refusal to write new poetry represent the decline of India's longstanding, traditional Islamic culture, which has begun to rapidly disappear since Partition and independence in 1947. In fact, his name makes this link clear: *Nur* means "light," and "Shahjahanabad" is the traditional name for Old Delhi, the part of the city built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. In other words, Nur's name translates as "the light of (Shah Jahan's) Old Delhi."

Sarla – Sarla is Deven's long-suffering wife, whom he describes as "plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic." She is a dutiful, obedient, traditional Hindu housewife: she cooks and cleans for Deven every day and never raises her voice at him, even when he insults and spurns her. (Instead, she expresses anger and frustration in indirect ways, such as by screaming out the window or spilling food on the table.) She is deeply disappointed in her life and marriage: she dreamed of buying modern luxuries like a refrigerator, cell phone, or car, but she can't afford any of them on Deven's meager salary. Despite their constant day-to-day conflicts, Deven also dreams of being

able to give Sarla and their son Manu a financially comfortable life. Ultimately, like Nur's wives Safiya and Imtiaz, Sarla demonstrates how Indian women in traditional, patriarchal families are often overlooked and powerless.

Manu – Manu is Deven and Sarla's young son, who is in primary school during the events of the novel. In Chapter Four, after returning from Delhi—and seeing how Nur treats his own son—Deven decides to spend some quality time with Manu. They go through Manu's schoolwork (which is concerningly messy), read a book of fables about animals (likely the *Panchatantra*), and then go on a walk through their neighborhood and down to a nearby canal, where they see a flock of **parrots**. Despite his constant disagreements with Sarla, Deven deeply loves Manu and wants to provide a better future for him. He frequently compares his relationship with Manu with his short-lived relationship with his own father (who died when he was a child). While he hopes that he can model strength and integrity for Manu, he generally considers himself to have failed as a parent—particularly at the end of the novel, when he admits that he is probably going to lose his job.

Imtiaz – Imtiaz is Nur's second wife, the mother of Nur's only son, and an accomplished poet. She is passionate, intellectual, and beautiful—she usually dresses in white and silver. She is also several decades younger than her husband, who met her when she was a dancer at the brothel down the street. (Ever since he met Imtiaz, Nur has largely forgotten about his first wife, Safiya.) Imtiaz spends much of her free time writing and performing poetry; since Nur has all but stopped writing, her performances appear to be the household's primary source of income. She frequently gets into explosive arguments with Nur about his excessive drinking, freeloading friends, and failure to write new material. But she also warns him *against* writing and reciting his poetry, particularly for Deven. In the second half of the novel, she becomes seriously ill but refuses to go to the doctor, and Nur refuses to recite any of his poetry at home until she gets better. Safiya accuses Imtiaz of faking her illness, but the novel never reveals the truth—one compelling possibility is that Imtiaz, Safiya, Nur, and the brothel owner all worked together to scam Deven, staging Imtiaz's illness to convince him that he *had* to reserve a separate room (through Safiya) if he wanted a chance to interview Nur. Regardless, Nur and Deven portray Imtiaz as jealous, irrational, and vengeful. In reality, Imtiaz is only asking for them to treat her as an intellectual and artistic equal. But they can't: they immediately dismiss everything she writes, just because she is a woman. (At the end of the novel, she sends Deven a collection of her work, and he refuses to even read it.) While Deven views Imtiaz as an antagonist, then, the novel clearly intends for readers to see her as a tragic figure whose struggle for recognition reflects Indian women's plight in a patriarchal society.

Safiya – Safiya is Nur's first wife. A shrewd old woman with black teeth, she takes pride in having married Nur before Imtiaz—even if she resents Imtiaz for being more beautiful, writing poetry, and giving Nur a son. While Nur spends his time drinking with his friends and Imtiaz spends hers raising her son and writing poetry, Safiya appears to do the housework and the cooking. She admires Nur's poetry and, unlike Imtiaz, encourages Deven to interview him. She even helps Deven rent a room from the brothel owner down the street. But at the end of the novel, when she mails Deven the bill, it becomes obvious that money was her real motive for helping him.

Abid Siddiqui – Abid Siddiqui is the sole member of Lala Ram Lal College's Urdu department. He is loosely related to the minor 19th-century Muslim nobleman who funded the department and the construction of Mirpore's primary mosque, and he lives in a huge, old house that is slowly falling apart, room by room. (Like Nur, Siddiqui's house represents the fate of Urdu in India.) Siddiqui is genuinely excited about Deven's research into Nur, and he uses his friendship with the registrar, Mr. Rai, to secure funding for it. But while he is generally sympathetic to Deven's troubles, he gets increasingly frustrated with Deven the more he shows up begging for help and money. By the end of the book, he all but gives up on helping Deven with the project and sells his house to a wealthy developer from Delhi (which represents India's old elite choosing capitalism and modernization over tradition).

Deven's Father – Deven's father was a timid, sickly man who died when Deven was a child. He adored Urdu poetry—especially Nur's work—and sparked Deven's passion in the same subject. Still, Deven primarily views his father as a negative role model: he does not want to be weak-willed, fail at work, or disappoint his wife, just like his father did to his mother. Nevertheless, Deven's life increasingly resembles his father's over the course of the novel, as does his relationship with his son Manu, with whom he bonds over books.

Chiku – Mr. Jain's nephew Chiku is Deven's "technical assistant" for recording the interviews with Nur. Unfortunately, Chiku is lazy, incompetent, and completely ignorant about poetry. He constantly falls asleep on the job and records the wrong parts of Nur's speeches—such as his food orders, but not his poetry recitations. Remorseless and hostile, Chiku complains that the work is keeping him from his sister's wedding preparations and threatens to quit unless Deven pays him. Ultimately, Chiku's recordings turn out to be completely useless, but Mr. Jain blames Deven for not securing the right recording space or properly directing him. Like Murad, Jain, Safiya, and arguably Nur himself, Chiku figures out how to manipulate and profit off Deven's weakness of will and blind adoration for Nur.

Ali – Ali is a servant boy who works for Nur. He is constantly helping Nur walk, serving him food and rum, and cleaning up his messes. Nevertheless, Nur treats Ali with cruelty and indifference. This is the first sign in the book of how indulgence, literary fame, and old age turned Nur into a callous, selfish, and

corrupt person.

Nur and Imtiaz's Son – Nur and his second wife, Imtiaz, have a young son. When Deven first visits Nur's house, Nur drunkenly goes downstairs to wake up this son, whom he claims is a talented singer. Deven follows him down and finds him lying on the ground next to a pool of his own vomit, while Imtiaz yells at him and their son cries.

Jayadev – Jayadev is one of Deven's colleagues in the Hindi department at Lala Ram Lal College. Deven hates Jayadev because he's shallow, unimaginative, and slimy: he pretends to be Deven's friend, then gossips behind his back. Still, he and Deven have a memorable conversation about the future of education and the purpose of the humanities. He is named after the ancient Sanskrit poet Jayadeva, which suggests that he is a Hindu character foil to the Muslim Nur, but his name also has the same root as Deven's (*dev*, or "god").

Pintu – Pintu is Mr. Jain's nephew, who accompanies Deven to Mirpore under the guise of helping him edit the (completely worthless) **tapes** of his interviews with Nur. Just like Mr. Jain's other nephew (Chiku), Pintu is lazy, rude, and completely incompetent. In fact, Dhanu ends up doing his job for him. But Pintu still insolently demands payment from Deven when the project is over, even though Mr. Jain appeared to offer his services for free at the outset.

Dhanu – Dhanu is one of Deven's Hindi students at Lala Ram Lal College. Dhanu has been studying radio technology during his free time over the summer break, so he agrees to help Deven salvage what he can from the **tapes** of his interviews with Nur. He and his friends take over for Pintu and condense all the recordings down to a single master tape. At first, it seems that they are trying to help out of a mix of interest, generosity, and boredom. But later, they try to blackmail Deven into giving them better grades in his Hindi class, making it clear that they had ulterior motives all along.

Mr. Jain – Mr. Jain is the manipulative electronics store owner who sells Deven the defective secondhand Japanese **tape recorder**, sends his nephew Chiku to operate it, and then sends his other nephew, Pintu, to try and salvage the tapes. Both of these nephews are incompetent, but demand money from Deven anyways, and Mr. Jain blames Deven for the interview process's failure. Murad initially brings Deven to Mr. Jain's store, and the novel heavily suggests that they worked together to scam Deven out of the research budget that his college gave him.

Raj – Raj is one of Deven's childhood friends from Delhi. He was "born with one leg shorter than the other," and they used to play cricket together. He never appears in the novel—he is supposedly off teaching in Cairo—but Deven stays at his house, with Raj's widowed aunt and the tailor who works downstairs, when he travels to Delhi to interview Nur.

The Tailor – The tailor who works downstairs from Raj's family apartment has started living there with Raj's elderly, widowed aunt. He claims that she feeds and houses him in exchange for "protection," but in reality, he is taking advantage of her hospitality. Like so many of the novel's other characters, he pretends to be generous and caring in order to disguise the way that he takes advantage of others. But since Deven also stays at Raj's house rent-free, the tailor's behavior raises the question of whether *Deven* is taking advantage of others, too.

The Widow – The widow is Deven's friend Raj's elderly aunt; she lives in Raj's family apartment in Delhi. Like many Hindu widows, she is socially ostracized and spends her time trying to win back favor from the gods by performing religious duties, like prayers and feeding the hungry. She never speaks, but she generously feeds and houses for Deven during his interviews with Nur.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Murad's Office Boy – The office boy performs odd tasks for Murad at work and guides Deven to Nur's house on his first visit to Chandni Chowk.

V.K. Sahay – Sahay is an elderly man who runs an Urdu printing press and rents a small portion of his office to Murad. While Murad claims that Sahay believes in his mission to revitalize Urdu literature, Sahay actually appears to pity his failure and disapprove of his dishonest business practices.

Chotu – Chotu is the servant boy who works for Siddiqui. He is a gifted singer, and he wins money off Siddiqui in their poker game. However, he acts sullen and resentful toward Siddiqui, who orders him around cruelly.

The Brothel Owner – The brothel owner rents Deven a room near Nur's house for his recordings and then kicks him and Chiku out when Nur decides to stop attending.

The Principal – The Principal is the head of Lala Ram Lal College, where Deven teaches. Deven hopes to meet with the Principal in order to win support for his research on Nur, but he never does.

Mr. Rai – Mr. Rai is the registrar at Lala Ram Lal College, where Deven works. He is a college friend of Siddiqui, who convinces him to fund Deven's research with Nur.

Mrs. Bhalla – Mrs. Bhalla is Deven and Sarla's nosy, widowed neighbor.

Bulu – Bulu is the bouncer at the brothel where Deven interviews Nur.

TERMS

Chandni Chowk – Chandni Chowk (Hindi for "Moonlight Plaza") is the most important market area in Old Delhi. Built in the 1600s by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, it is located next to

the former Mughal capitol, the Red Fort, and Delhi's central mosque, the Jama Masjid. In Desai's novel, **Nur** lives in Chandni Chowk, which represents the heart of Old Delhi and the fate of India's diverse traditional culture, with its Persian-influenced Urdu and mix of Hindu and Muslim influences.

Urdu – Urdu is one of South Asia's major languages, and its fate is central to the plot of *In Custody*. It was northern India's primary literary language for centuries, but since most of its speakers fled to Pakistan after the Partition of 1947, Hindi dominates Indian life today. (Still, Urdu remains an official language in Pakistan and several Indian states.) In fact, Hindi and Urdu are fundamentally two versions of the same language: they have the same basic grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. However, much of their *specialized* vocabulary is different: Hindi takes more words from Sanskrit, while Urdu takes more from Persian. Moreover, Hindi uses the Devanagari writing system (which connects letters with a horizontal line), while Urdu uses a writing system based on the Arabic script. Thus, while Hindi and Urdu are indistinguishable in everyday conversation, Hindi speakers would miss a few words of Urdu poetry recitations or political speeches and would not be able to read Urdu at all. Overall, then, the distinction between Hindi and Urdu is just as much about religious and cultural identity as it is the languages themselves.

Awaaz – *Awaaz* is **Murad**'s Urdu literary magazine. The word *awaaz* means "voice" in Urdu—but also in Hindi, Persian, Turkish, and about a dozen other related languages.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MEMORY AND THE PASSAGE OF TIME

In Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*, the small-town Hindi teacher Deven Sharma gets the opportunity to interview his idol, the legendary Urdu poet Nur, for his friend Murad's literary magazine. Deven expects the elderly Nur to be a gentle, wise, honorable scholar living a quiet, spiritual life surrounded by art. But in reality, Nur is a sickly, gluttonous grouch who lives in a chaotic Old Delhi bazaar. He spends most of his time drinking rum, scarfing down kebabs, and complaining about various ailments, and bantering mindlessly with a crowd of second-rate amateur poets, who blindly worship him so they can eat his food and drink his rum. Nur hasn't written new poetry in years, and Deven's attempts to interview him end in disaster. At most, Nur occasionally recites old work and lectures his followers about the slow death of Urdu, which was India's main literary and political language until the early 20th century. In fact, Nur's declining health, both physical and mental, is an extended metaphor for the death of Urdu—and northern India's Islamic history more generally—since the Partition made India a Hindu-majority nation in 1947. And these declines find many other parallels throughout the novel. For instance, Deven agrees to **tape record** his interviews with Nur because everyone tells him that technology will make print irrelevant, his colleague Jayadev laments how the humanities are losing their relevance, and Old Delhi itself seems to be dying, with its buildings crumbling, its traditions fading, and its sky thick with dust that blots out the sun.

Thus, when Deven tries to make a final record of the dying Nur's poetic genius, he is really trying to capture India's past before it disappears forever. As Nur himself puts it: "before Time crushes us into dust we must record our struggle against it." The question at the heart of this novel is: how can we celebrate the past while also embracing the future that destroys it? While Deven spends much of the novel sulking about Nur's decline, lamenting change, and wishing he could turn back the clock, he changes his mind in the novel's final passage. Nur might soon die, and Urdu poetry along with it, but its legacy can still inspire future writers and teach Indians to value their country's layered, multicultural history. In short, Deven realizes that his duty is not just to capture what is timeless in Nur's life and work, but also to use Nur's legacy to help create a new, brighter future for India. Desai ends her novel with this epiphany in order to suggest that people who study and remember the past should not drown in nostalgia or fight *against* change, which is inevitable. Instead, people should determine how their special understanding of the past can contribute to *positive* change in the future.

AMBITION AND FAILURE

Like many a middle-aged teacher, Deven Sharma once harbored ambitions of literary fame and fortune. He wrote poetry as a young man and dreamed of becoming a major writer, or at least a respected scholar. But by the time the novel takes place, his career has long since stalled. He earns a meager salary teaching Hindi in the small town of Mirpore, nobody will publish his poems or his book on the Urdu poet Nur, and his family can't even afford a phone or a refrigerator, never mind a car. However, when Deven's friend Murad offers him the chance to interview Nur, this reignites his dreams of glory. Deven envisions himself as the scholar who brings Nur back into the public eye and gives Urdu poetry its rightful place alongside the world's other great literary traditions. And yet his interviews constantly get delayed and ruined, and to his surprise, his idol Nur actually feels much like he does: ignored and underappreciated, left behind by the world and surrounded by people who do not

truly understand his genius.

Both men cope with their sense of failure by alternating between high hopes and despair—they fantasize that everything will work out for them, then they grow disappointed as soon as they hit an obstacle and resign themselves to failure. When reality doesn't live up to their fantasies, in other words, they give up instead of taking action. Nur can't find the energy to write new poems, and Deven knows that other people are manipulating him and ruining his interviews, but he never works up the courage to stop them. However, at the end of the novel, when Deven is hopelessly in debt and on the brink of losing his job, he finally realizes that he can't resign himself to fate anymore. He decides that the only way *out* of his troubles is *through* them, and in the book's closing line, he marches back toward the college, ready to fight for his job and his future. Thus, even as Deven's scholarly project fails, he succeeds in developing a sense of responsibility, courage, and determination, which will serve him far better in the long term. Indeed, the novel suggests that this ability to take responsibility for failure and respond to hardship through action rather than despair is the true mark of maturity.

FAMILY, GENDER, AND INDIAN TRADITION

In Custody's three central characters are all men—in fact, Desai claims that she originally planned to "write in the male voice and just keep out all female characters." She eventually changed her mind, but only because she realized that she needed significant female characters in order to make her point: in much of India, men and women live in almost completely separate worlds, to the point that they have trouble communicating across the divide and understanding one another's lives. Further, Desai shows that the severe power imbalances between men and women in traditional families seriously limit women's opportunities and breed conflict, resentment, and even violence. These dynamics are clear in the two families at the center of the novel: Deven, Sarla, and their son Manu in Mirpore; and Nur, his two wives Imtiaz and Safiya, and his and Imtiaz's unnamed son in Delhi. Long before the novel starts, Deven and Sarla's has marriage collapsed into quiet resentment. Sarla hates that Deven is lazy and barely earns enough money to buy food. Meanwhile, Deven hates Sarla's "plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic" ways, not realizing (or not wanting to admit) that they are reactions to her destitution and powerlessness. Sarla scarcely leaves the house, and to avoid her, Deven scarcely enters it; neither knows what the other does all day, and their conversations are all arguments. And Deven refuses to reconcile because "it would have permanently undermined his position of power over her." In other words, they both realize that traditional gender roles create a power dynamic that divides them, but Deven chooses this power over unity.

Nur's family's situation is worse—especially because Imtiaz and Nur are jealous of each another's poetry. For instance, when Imtiaz performs her work before a huge, cheering audience, Nur walks out, and then he and Deven angrily insist that Imtiaz is no good. Their tone makes it clear that they view her as a threat: they feel that the only thing worse than failing is being upstaged by one's wife, because it means losing the power and privilege that they have in the family just by virtue of being men. In fact, when Imtiaz sends Deven her poems at the end of the novel, he refuses to even read them. He won't consider that maybe the brilliant Urdu poetry he has been looking for all along is right in front of him—just because it comes from a woman. In this way, Deven weaponizes the deep-set sexism in traditional Indian society to keep Urdu poetry gender-segregated, undermining his own quest to revive it and crushing Imtiaz's dreams.

BEAUTY VS. UTILITY

The title *In Custody* comes from the book's closing passage. The passage begins with Deven overcome with resentment toward his former idol Nur—who has left Deven mired in debt and professionally ruined, with no meaningful work to show for it. But then, Deven realizes that he and Nur have actually made a kind of mutual exchange: he has become the "custodian of Nur's genius," while Nur has "place[d] him in custody too" by taking over his life. Deven spends most of the novel believing that everyone else is exploiting him for personal gain while he tries to follow his passion. But he ultimately realizes that *he* has also been exploiting *Nur's* passion for *his own* personal gain. Deven's epiphany resolves a tension that runs throughout the novel between viewing literature as art and viewing it as work—or valuing it because it's *beautiful*, or because it's *useful*.

This tension first comes out when Deven visits Nur and they both feel that the other isn't taking them seriously enough. Deven wants to preserve and study Nur's poetry, which he sees as a kind of sacred art, while Nur and his wife Imtiaz see Deven's efforts to preserve and analyze Nur's work as a form of *defilement*. For instance, Imtiaz accuses literary scholars of "feed[ing] upon [poets'] carcasses," and Nur objects to being "bled [...] to produce poetry." To them, poetry in its truest form is a live recital that brings people together, not a bunch of words on a page. Indeed, they think it's a waste of time and money to listen to stuffy academics who just explain the work of dead writers. Yet while Nur and Imtiaz accuse Deven of exploiting *them*, they also exploit *him* for their own benefit—and so does everyone else: Murad uses Deven to get inexpensive material for his magazine; Nur uses him to get free food and drink for himself and his friends; and Nur's other wife, Safiya, uses him to get an envelope of cash in exchange for Nur's time. While everyone seems to be conspiring to squeeze money out of Deven, this doesn't mean it's an unfair trade: as he points out

in the final passage, he still gets the great privilege to preserve and transmit Nur's legacy. In short, the novel suggests that there's no true difference between the two viewpoints: artists are merely those who trade what is beautiful for what is useful, and seeking beauty is just a disguised form of seeking self-interest.

INDIAN IDENTITY AND PLURALISM

The longstanding conflict between Hindi and Urdu forms the political backdrop for Anita Desai's *In Custody*. In fac, Hindi and Urdu are different dialects of the same language: they have the same basic grammar and pronunciation, but different writing systems and specialized vocabulary. They have diverged because of *history*: from the 1200s to the 1800s, India was ruled primarily by Persian-speaking Muslim empires, and Urdu—a mixture of Persian and local dialects—became the main language of the upper classes in and around the capital, Delhi. The British made Urdu their language of government in the 1830s, and Hindi had no official status and little literary tradition until the 20th century.

However, most of northern India's Urdu-speaking Muslims moved to Pakistan after the Partition of 1947, and the Indian government has since given Hindi preeminence over Urdu in every sphere of public life. This is why the central figures in Desai's novel lament Urdu's decline: it was northern India's main language for centuries, but it is increasingly irrelevant and marginalized today. In particular, it has gotten absorbed into communal disputes between Hindus and Muslims. This is why Deven's Hindu boss Trivedi threatens to fire him for "ruin[ing] my boys [students] with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language." Yet, while a few of the Urdu activists in the book link their language to Muslim politics, most do not. In fact, Desai's protagonist Deven is actually a Hindu (and Hindi teacher) who appreciates Urdu for its literary tradition, not its political or religious connotations. Thus, the novel's focus on Urdu is actually an argument for tolerance and multiculturalism in India. While many Indians now view the tension between Hindi and Urdu as a stand-in for conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, the novel shows that this idea is a recent invention. On the contrary, Urdu's history shows that coexistence is the rule: Indian identity has always been a mixture of multiple cultures, including domestic and foreign, Sanskrit and Persian, and Hindu and Muslim influences.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TAPE RECORDER

The broken tape recorder represents the way that modern life and technology fail to live up to their promise in India. After Nur agrees to let Deven interview him and record some of his unpublished work, Murad persuades Deven that technology is the future, and it would be far easier to tape-record the poems (and transcribe them later) than take dictation by hand. Siddiqui and Mr. Rai persuade the college librarian to purchase the recorder as a way to promote "audio-visual methods of teaching." (The novel is set in the early 1980s; such recording technology was not a common research tool yet in India.) Murad takes Deven to Mr. Jain's electronics shop, where Murad and Mr. Jain dupe him into taking an old, secondhand Japanese tape recorder. Deven knows that he's being manipulated but feels that he has no option, so he goes along with it and even agrees to hire Mr. Jain's surly nephew Chiku to operate the tape recorder. Surely enough, the machine doesn't work. After several weeks of recording sessions, the tapes are full of background noise, honking sounds, and occasional drink orders—but almost no poetry. The recorder's failure dooms Deven's project, leaving him with just one usable poem: the one Nur wrote down by hand in his notebook. Deven worries that the college will accuse him of misusing its funds and fire him. Thus, Deven's attempt to preserve traditional knowledge through modern technology backfires. Metaphorically speaking, perhaps the recording device does not pick up Nur's poetry because Urdu comes from a bygone age and is incompatible with India's aspiration to become a modern, English-speaking democracy with an advanced, globalized economy. On another level, the recorder's failure is a warning against placing too much faith in new, modern, foreign technologies when traditional methods still work perfectly well.

PARROTS AND JACKALS

Parrots and jackals represent two different ways that scholars can relate to the subjects they study: by faithfully carrying on their legacies (parrots) or by dishonestly exploiting those legacies for their own benefit (jackals).

Notably, Desai sets up this symbolism by showing Deven read his son Manu a book of moral fables about animals in Chapter Four. This is almost certainly a children's edition of the famous Sanskrit *Panchatantra*, which includes many well-known stories (with different morals) about both parrots and jackals. A few pages later, Deven and Manu see a flock of squawking parrots on a nearby tree, and Deven picks up one of their fallen feathers. He feels a brief sense of peace and remembers his obligations to his son. At the very end of the novel, Deven returns to this spot, where he remembers the parrot's feather as "a joyous, delightful omen." Shortly thereafter, he realizes

that his true calling is to be the "custodian of Nur's genius" and represent his work and legacy to the rest of the world. The parrot feather leads Deven to identify his purpose as a father and a scholar. In this sense, Desai associates parrots—which learn to faithfully repeat what they hear—with passing on wisdom and fulfilling one's obligations to future generations.

In contrast, "jackal" is one of the most common insults in the book: Deven and Siddiqui call the registrar Rai "Mr. Jackal," and Imtiaz compares university researchers to "jackals" who "feed upon [poets'] carcasses." In both cases, scholars become *jackals*—opportunistic dogs who eat anything they can scavenge—when they use others' work for their own benefit, without producing anything of value. Deven gets dangerously close to becoming one: when he begs Siddiqui for funding, Desai writes that he "howl[s], jackal-like, on his knees."

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *In Custody* published in 2013.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"Why should a visit from Murad upset him so much? There was no obvious reason of course—they had known each other since they were at school together: Murad had been the spoilt rich boy with money in his pocket for cinema shows and cigarettes and Deven the poor widow's son who could be bribed and bought to do anything for him, and although this had been the basis of their friendship, it had grown and altered and stood the test of time. But Deven did not like him appearing without warning during college hours and disturbing him just when he needed to concentrate; it was very upsetting.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Murad , Nur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In Custody opens with Deven receiving a surprise visit from Murad, an unruly childhood friend. As this passage explains, while their friendship was once based on wealthy Murad bribing poor Deven to do his bidding, it has "stood the test of time," particularly because of their shared passion for Urdu poetry. Murad used his family wealth to buy the literary magazine *Awaaz*, and Deven became a Hindi teacher (since there are no jobs in Urdu). In this sense, Deven knows that he should feel excited about Murad's visit, which likely means that something exciting is happening in the literary world. But actually, he feels anxious and upset, even though he can't find any "obvious reason" for it.

Over the course of the novel, the reason for Deven's feelings will become increasingly clear to readers: he feels uneasy around Murad because he knows that Murad isn't trustworthy. In fact, their friendship *hasn't* really "grown and altered" as much as Deven thinks it has: even though Murad *does* offer him an exciting new opportunity, ultimately, Murad is still trying to use and manipulate him. Thus, Deven's apprehension here in the novel's opening scenes foreshadows the conflict that he will face over the rest of the book, as Murad sends him on a wild-goose chase to interview Nur. Ultimately, Deven sacrifices his time, sanity, and career for the sake of a goal that he will never achieve.

"The desperation of his circumstances made him say something he never would have otherwise. All through his childhood and youth he had known only one way to deal with life and that was to lie low and remain invisible. Now he leaned forward on his elbows and said emotionally, "If only we got payment for the articles and reviews that we write for magazines and journals, that would be of some help."

Related Characters: Deven Sharma (speaker), Murad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Over his lunch with Murad, Deven finally works up the courage to point out that he hasn't been paid for his last few articles in *Awaaz*. His teaching job pays next to nothing, the lunch is eating into his meager savings, and he knows that Murad is wealthy enough to pay him, so he indirectly asks Murad for his pay, even though "he never would have [said something] otherwise." In fact, this scene is just the first iteration of a pattern that repeats itself throughout the novel, as Deven repeatedly tries and fails to get Murad to treat him fairly—and then keeps coming back for more.

Indeed, one way to interpret this novel is as the story of Deven's gradual transformation from a passive pushover to an active agent who controls his own life and fate. Arguably, Deven's struggle to break free from this cycle is also a metaphor for India's struggle to develop as an independent democracy after centuries of colonialism. While the novel's final passages show Deven's personal transformation to be complete, the tension between passivity and action is on

Deven's mind throughout the whole book. In moments like this one, he *tries* to act boldly, but he fails spectacularly and only ends up even more discouraged as a result. Readers may even notice their own emotional responses changing from shock and pity to irritation and exhaustion as Deven lets other characters exploit and manipulate him, over and over, until they utterly destroy his life.

"Now I am planning a special issue on Urdu poetry. 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 vegetarian monster, Hindi?" He pronounced the last word with such disgust that it made Deven shrink back and shrivel in his chair, for Hindi was what he taught at the college and for which he was therefore responsible to some degree. "That language of peasants," Murad sneered, picking his teeth with a matchstick. "The language that is raised on radishes and potatoes," he laughed rudely, pushing aside the empty plates on the table. "Yet, like these vegetables, it flourishes, while Urdu—language of the court in days of royalty—now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city."

Related Characters: Murad (speaker), Deven Sharma, Nur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Just before proposing that Deven write a feature on Nur, Murad takes the opportunity to make these rather bitter, fanatical comments about the relative status of Hindi and Urdu in modern India. As his claims show, even though Hindi and Urdu are by any measure two dialects of the same language, the conflict between them is closely linked to India's political history and Hindu-Muslim religious divide. For hundreds of years, Urdu was the refined dialect of India's rulers and the nobility that surrounded them, particularly in Delhi. And since independence, it has still been widely spoken among India's Muslim population—which, nevertheless, shrunk precipitously after millions of Muslims moved to Pakistan in the immediate aftermath of the Partition. Meanwhile, Hindi has taken precedence over Urdu: once the "language of peasants," spoken by the nation's (largely vegetarian) Hindu masses, it has since become the primary national language.

Thus, Murad's complaint is that, in their rush to democratize their nation and spread Hindi, Indians have forgotten Urdu's beauty and rich literary history. Murad scarcely cares about religion, but even though India is legally a secular democracy, the spread of Hindi is closely linked to right-wing efforts to recast it as an officially Hindu nation. Many Hindi teachers and activists *do* view their jobs through a Hindu nationalist lens, even today—for instance, many try to "purify" the language by introducing Sanskrit alternatives to English, Persian, Turkic, and Arabic loanwords. Deven by no means feels this way—in fact, he has chosen to teach Hindi so that he can continue to study and immerse himself in the Urdu literature that he loves. But Murad associates him with these efforts to try and guilt him into dedicating more of his time and energy to Urdu.

Chapter 2 Quotes

The bus soon left Mirpore behind. It came as a slight shock to Deven that one could so easily and quickly free oneself from what had come to seem to him not only the entire world since he had no existence outside it, but often a cruel trap, or prison, as well, an indestructible prison from which there was no escape.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

When Deven takes the bus from Mirpore, where he lives and works, to Delhi, where he was raised, he feels an overwhelming sense of freedom and relief. This not only reminds him of how trapped he has felt in his repetitive, thankless life, but also shows him that change is much easier than he expected. Even though he had all but given up hope of escaping from the drudgery of his daily routine, as soon as he leaves Mirpore, he realizes that it was only a "indestructible prison" in his mind, not in reality. Indeed, this passage makes the novel's central premise all the more clear: Deven's quest to find, interview, and uncover the truth about Nur is really about his own search for a more meaningful, fulfilling alternative to his life in Mirpore. Put differently, Deven sees Nur as an opportunity to break out of the cycle of stagnation, failure, and misery in which he feels stuck. In contrast to Mirpore, which represents this stagnation, Delhi is full of dynamism and possibility—and by using Nur to delve into its past, Deven reshapes his own future.

> Mirpore was isolated but not cut off from the world. [...] The constant comings and goings of trains and buses gave it an air of being a halting place in a long journey, a caravanserai of a kind. [...] This had the effect of making Mirpore seem in a state of perpetual motion. There was really more of bustle than doldrums and it was often deafening. Yet the bustle was strangely unproductive—the yellow sweets were amongst the very few things that were actually manufactured here; there was no construction to speak of, except the daily one of repairing; no growth except in numbers, no making permanent what had remained through the centuries so stubbornly temporary—and it was other cities, other places that saw the fruits of all the bustle, leaving the debris and the litter behind for Mirpore.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

This portrait of Mirpore helps explain why Deven finds it so dreary and uninspiring. People are always passing through it on their way to Delhi, and yet it has no identity or industry of its own. Nobody ever moves here anymore—instead, they go to the capital, which is just a stone's throw away. So, the town just slowly decays. In the past, it may have taken long enough to reach Delhi that Mirpore could have an identity of its own, but now, it is more like a *caravanserai* (roadside inn) than a regional capital. In the future, the novel suggests, Mirpore is destined to disappear without a trace—and nobody will miss it. (While the city is fictional, it closely resembles many economically depressed cities surrounding Delhi on India's great plains, such as Rohtak, Aligarh, and the similarly named Meerut.)

Mirpore's decay is also a metaphor for Deven's life, as well as India as a whole, in the years after independence. In all three cases, the appearance of motion disguises the reality of stagnation: Mirpore is full of "strangely unproductive" bustle; Deven goes about his busy everyday life but feels like he's achieving nothing meaningful; and India struggles to grow and modernize in its first decades of independence.

> It was sadly disappointing to him that he was not travelling up to Delhi on this important occasion in a style more suited to a literary man, a literary event. He had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings. The latter were constantly assaulted and wrecked by the former—as now in the form of the agonized dog, the jolting bus, the peanut-crunching neighbour, the little tin box in which Sarla had packed his lunch [... and] the smallness of the sum of money he carried in his pocket: all these indignities and impediments. How, out of such base material, was he to wrest a meeting with a great poet, some kind of dialogue with him, some means of ensuring that this rare opportunity would not also turn to dust, spilled blood and lament?

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Sarla

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19-20

Explanation and Analysis

On his way to Delhi, Deven reflects on the vast gulf between his grand aspirations and the rather mundane life that he is actually living. As a "literary man," he feels that he should be traveling in style—or at least on something nicer than the rickety public bus. Notably, he feels this way even though he is finally starting some meaningful, compelling research: this may be the highest point in his career thus far, and yet he still feels that he deserves much more. Perhaps the "indignities and impediments" of his everyday life are the reason he has not become a great poet and scholar, he thinks—but his underlying fear is that his life and work are just as insignificant as "the meanness of his physical existence" suggests.

While readers may explain Deven's attitude as arrogance, male entitlement, or just legitimate frustration with a corrupt world that doesn't value art, it's clear that this passage is a way of foreshadowing his meeting with Nur—whose lifestyle is also far short of the glory that scholars imagine great poets should deserve. Indeed, Deven's dissatisfaction with his life reflects his underlying assumptions about what literature is and who the people who write it should be. To him, like to most people in his profession, literature is among the greatest human expressions of the world's beauty, and it's a great tragedy that the world views it as yet another commodity to be bought and sold.

Life is no more than a funeral procession winding towards the grave,
Its small joys the flowers of funeral wreaths …

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Deven's bus from Mirpore to Delhi hits and kills a stray dog, and as he watches crows fly over to start feeding on its body, he recites these lines from a poem by Nur. They offer a bleak view of life, in which people's pleasures and accomplishments are just temporary distractions before death permanently snatches them away. On the one hand, this fatalistic perspective suggests that there is little reason to try and accomplish anything significant or improve one's life, because everyone ends up in the same place. On the other hand, remembering that one will inevitably die is a valuable way to make the most of one's life—even if that only amounts to putting more "flowers [on] funeral wreaths." Of course, the same principle applies to history and literature, too: they inevitably fade away, and the most people can hope to do is make a record of their existence before they disappear. In addition to establishing death as a central motif in this novel and showing the reader how deeply acquainted Deven is with Nur's poetry, these lines also foreshadow Deven's visit to Delhi, in which he finds both Nur and the old part of the city in an advanced state of decline.

Chapter 3 Quotes

If it had not been for the colour and the noise, Chandni Chowk might have been a bazaar encountered in a nightmare; it was so like a maze from which he could find no exit, in which he wandered between the peeling, stained walls of office buildings, the overflowing counters of shops and stalls, wondering if the urchin sent to lead him through it was not actually a malevolent imp leading him to his irrevocable disappearance in the reeking heart of the bazaar. The heat and the crowds pressed down from above and all sides, solid and suffocating as sleep.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Murad , Nur , Murad's Office Boy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Deven arrives in Chandni Chowk, the heart of Old Delhi, to visit Nur. He's astonished to think that the great poet could live in such a nightmarish, decaying, chaotic place. In fact, the area is just like Mirpore in many ways—the major difference is that, whereas Mirpore has no distinct identity, and its bustle serves no purpose, Chandni Chowk is a significant place whose story is central to India's national identity, and it's bustling because it's a major commercial hub.

As Murad's office boy leads Deven into the heart of Chandni Chowk, his reactions reflect his hopes and fears for his meeting with Nur. He worries that Murad is sending him on a fool's errand—which is a reasonable concern, since so far, Murad has told him a series of lies and made him a series of false promises, then led him into the bazaar and back out again. At a deeper level, he feels overwhelmed and suffocated by the path Murad has led him down, and he worries that his encounter with Nur will turn out to be closer to a nightmare than the dream he was expecting. And yet, at the same time, he also views Nur's poetry as the shining beacon of clarity that gives meaning to all this madness—that of the bazaar and that of India as a whole, as its cities collapse in on themselves and its royal heritage decays.

Before he could make out who had opened the door and now stood behind it, he heard an immense voice, cracked and hoarse and thorny, boom from somewhere high above their heads: "Who is it that disturbs the sleep of the aged at this hour of the afternoon that is given to rest? It can only be a great fool. Fool, are you a fool?"

And Deven, feeling some taut membrane of reservation tear apart inside him and a surging expansion of joy at hearing the voice and the words that could only belong to that superior being, the poet, sang back, "Sir, I am! I am!"

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur (speaker), Murad's Office Boy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis

When Murad's office boy finally leads Deven to Nur's house,

they knock, and this is what ensues. Fittingly, Nur responds like a great, wise elder, with a booming voice that seems to lay down the law. Feeling like he has reached the promised land, Deven gleefully lets out "a surging expression of joy" and ironically agrees that he's "a great fool." This isn't just comic relief—it's also foreshadowing, as over the course of the novel, Deven's adoration for Nur will draw him into one foolish decision after another. In fact, Nur, his family, and his friends prey on Deven because they know this—whereas Deven values Nur's poetry for its beauty and profundity, they use it as a tool to manipulate him into giving them money and doing what they want. So Deven does turn out to be "a great fool"—if only because his love for Nur and poetry blinds him.

> In the midst of all the shadows, the poet's figure was in startling contrast, being entirely dressed in white. His white beard was splayed across his chest and his long white fingers clasped across it. He did not move and appeared to be a marble form. His body had the density, the compactness of stone. It was large and heavy not on account of obesity or weight, but on account of age and experience. The emptying out and wasting of age had not yet begun its process. He was still at a moment of completion, quite whole.

Related Characters: Nur

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This is how the novel describes Nur when Deven first meets him. Because of his health problems, he spends nearly all of his time lying down, but he is still an imposing, magnificent presence. His impressive beard and motionless, stone-like body represent his mighty intellect, and the comparisons to white marble are indirect references to the great works of Indo-Islamic architecture that India's Mughal emperors (like the Taj Mahal and Lahore's Badshahi Mosque) erected. The implication is clear: Nur is a living monument to the greatness of Urdu and the culture that created it. But he does not have long left before "the emptying out and wasting of age" starts to take its toll, and so Deven has arrived at just the right time to preserve Nur's work, mind, and memory for posterity.

> "Urdu poetry?" he finally sighed, turning a little to one side, towards Deven although not actually addressing himself to a person, merely to a direction, it seemed. "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." He tapped his chest with one finger.

Related Characters: Nur (speaker), Deven Sharma, Murad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 37-38

Explanation and Analysis

After Deven introduces himself to Nur and explains that he has come to interview him for Murad's magazine, Nur gives him this speech about Urdu and its poetic legacy. He argues that Urdu poetry—the very thing Deven is trying to save—is already dead. He gives a brief history lesson to remind readers: Urdu was the Indian elite's primary language during the Mughal (or Moghul) Empire, and then the British imposed English in its place—but let it remain an official language—during their period of rule. Worst of all, since India became independent in 1947 (and lost much of its Muslim population to newly formed Pakistan), "the Hindiwallahs" (Hindi speakers) have all but taken over.

So, Urdu doesn't seem to have a future in India—not even in Delhi, the city where it was born and grew into one of the world's great literary languages. Tellingly, Nur presents himself as Urdu's "corpse […] waiting to be buried," seemingly agreeing with Deven's view that he is the last great Urdu poet, yet suggesting that it is too late to save the language from its inevitable decline. While Deven desperately hopes that Nur is wrong—and that something can be done to save Urdu—he will eventually admit that it *will* inevitably die, one way or another, and so the most he can do is to preserve its memory.

> It was clear to Deven that these louts, these lafangas of the bazaar world—shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed parasites—lived out the fantasy of being poets, artists and bohemians here on Nur's terrace, in Nur's company. [...] This did not surprise Deven; it was exactly the kind of circle he had been familiar with as a student, but what was astonishing was that the great poet Nur should be in the centre of it, like a serene white tika on the forehead of a madman. It was not where Deven had expected to find him. He had pictured him living either surrounded by elderly, sage and dignified litterateurs or else entirely alone, in divine isolation. What were these clowns and jokers and jugglers doing around him, or he with them?

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47-48

Explanation and Analysis

Deven is baffled and disappointed when a crowd of ordinary men from the bazaar shows up at Nur's house, then starts partying and chatting mindlessly about poetry with him. As this passage explains, Deven knows that this kind of group exists—indeed, he was once part of one—but he just didn't expect for them to mix with Nur. He envisioned Nur living with his intellectual peers, or else in "divine isolation." But instead, he's surrounded by "clowns and jokers and jugglers."

In other words, Deven thought there was a serious difference between the kind of bohemian college students who play at being poets and the great writers who actually become them. But Nur's friends show him that this assumption is wrong—and they profoundly shake Deven's sense of reality. After all, as a Hindi professor, Deven's whole job is to take literature seriously. But if not even the people who write it feel the same way, then how does he know that he is approaching it in the correct way? Can he justify his deep-seated belief that literature's true purpose is to enlighten and beautify the world for its readers if India's greatest poet instead treats it as a party trick?

> "It is not a matter of Pakistan and Hindustan, of Hindi and Urdu. It is not even a matter of history. It is time you should be speaking of but cannot—the concept of time is too vast for you, I can see that, and yet it is all we really know about in our hearts."

Related Characters: Nur (speaker), Deven Sharma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

The crowd at Nur's house inevitably turns its attention to the conflict between Hindi and Urdu, and Nur offers this profound (if slightly vague) speech arguing that the true problem is *time*. His point is that everything inevitably changes, so it's futile to fight against this basic principle of the universe—to act as though one could ever reverse the flow of time. This doesn't mean the past has no value—it just means that humanity can never return to it. Practically speaking, Nur means that Urdu is already dead in India, and Hindi has come to replace it; the solution is not to try and revive or vindicate Urdu or to turn against Pakistan (which arguably contributed to Urdu's death in India, because most Indian Muslims moved there). Rather, the solution is to learn about the Urdu that existed in the past and then use that knowledge to help make the most of what now exists in the present.

Of course, this succinctly captures the ultimate conclusion that Deven reaches by the end of his quest to find Nur: we should *value* and *study* the past, but we shouldn't foolishly try to bring it back. Indeed, the past's value is not merely our emotional attachment to it—it's also the way it can help us understand the present and shape the future.

> That, [Deven] saw, was the glory of poets—that they could distance events and emotions, place them where perspective made it possible to view things clearly and calmly. He realized that he loved poetry not because it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where they became bearable. That was what Nur's verse did—placed frightening and inexplicable experiences like time and death at a point where they could be seen and studied, in safety.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In response to Nur's speech about the nature of time and historical change, Deven gives this a brief interior monologue about the beauty of poetry. While many readers and scholars value poetry because of the emotional

experiences it can convey, Deven loves it for precisely the opposite reason: it helps him distance himself from powerful experiences, turn off his emotions, and examine things rationally instead.

This line of thought gives readers important insight into Deven's psychology. Unlike many poets and lovers of literature, he doesn't like emotions—in fact, strong feelings make him deeply uncomfortable, and he prefers to analyze his way through life instead. This also underlines the fundamental difference between Deven and Nur, as well as Nur's criticism of the way Deven chooses to live his life. Namely, Nur complains that scholars like Deven destroy poetry by analyzing it—they act as though they can consume and digest it, then they tell the reader what it really means. But this robs the poetry of its vitality. Indeed, this is why Nur follows his speech by insulting Deven for choosing to become a Hindi teacher. Notably, at the end of the novel, Deven finally realizes that Nur is right—that poetry's power comes precisely from the fact that (unlike science) it *can't* be reduced to a single right answer. That said, Nur has one more critique: literary scholarship is a parasitic profession—men like Deven become rich and famous for analyzing poetry, but the poets who write it don't.

❝ Deven never quite believed what happened next. He was so confused and shattered by it that he did not know what it was that shattered him, just as the victim of an accident sees and hears the pane of glass smash or sheet of metal buckle but cannot tell what did it—rock, bullet or vehicle. The truth was that he did not really want ever to think back to that scene. If his mind wandered inadvertently towards it, it immediately sensed disaster and veered away into safer regions.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur , Imtiaz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's narrator offers the reader this brief aside just before Deven follows Nur downstairs—and finds him lying face-down on the floor, next to a puddle of his vomit, while his wife Imtiaz yells at him. This commentary serves to help the reader prepare themselves for the scene to come, understand its long-term effect on Deven, and get a clearer picture of Deven's psychology in general. Namely, Deven tries to forget what he sees: it so tarnishes his view of Nur that he realizes he cannot continue to idolize the man if he keeps it in mind. No poet so great could be reduced to such a pathetic state, nor treat his family so poorly—Nur's actions are simply incompatible with his literary greatness, at least to Deven, who believes that only great men can write great poems. In turn, this passage shows that Deven prefers to maintain his distorted ideas rather than correct them—he would rather believe in a lie than face the truth. So, he chooses to forget, just to protect his own sense of Nur's greatness—on which his own fragile sense of self depends. Notably, sexism facilitates this process, too: in a highly patriarchal society like India, it's all too easy for men like Deven to ignore complaints, accusations, and arguments that come from women like Imtiaz.

❝ "He *was* a poet, a scholar—but is he now? Look at him!" She pointed dramatically at Nur who was huddled, whimpering, on the mattress, holding his knees to his chest and rocking from side to side in agony. "Do you call that a poet, or even a man? All of you—*you followers* of his—you have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal, like a pig, laughing at your jokes, singing your crude songs, when he should be at work, or resting to prepare himself for work—"

Related Characters: Imtiaz (speaker), Deven Sharma, Nur , Sarla

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Deven follows Nur downstairs and stumbles upon an unsightly scene: Nur is lying on the floor while his wife (Imtiaz) stands over him, chastising him for wasting his time and money partying with a group of lowlifes from the bazaar. She tells Deven that he is partially responsible, but he insists that he has come to pay his respects to Nur, not to distract him from his work.

Imtiaz hasn't met Deven yet, so she assumes he's another nobody from the bazaar—and doesn't realize that he's a serious scholar who actually wants to try and preserve Nur's legacy. If Imtiaz's ignorance about Deven's intentions is the first deeply ironic element of this scene, the second is that Deven feels exactly the same way as Imtiaz: he *also* expected Nur to be writing, not partying, and was *also* deeply disappointed to see him "eat[ing] and drink[ing] like some animal" with his crowd of crude "*followers*." Yet, when Imtiaz confronts Deven, he feels compelled to defend and identify with Nur, no matter how repulsive he finds Nur's

behavior. Gender is clearly a central part of this: Deven specifically decides to defend Nur against *his wife* because he cares about maintaining his own sense of superiority to Sarla. If Deven admits that Nur's wife is right to criticize her husband's behavior, then perhaps this means that Sarla is right to criticize his, too.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ She was the daughter of a friend of [Deven's] aunt's, she lived on the same street as that family, they had observed her for years and found her suitable in every way: plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic. What they had not suspected was that Sarla, as a girl and as a new bride, had aspirations, too; they had not understood because within the grim boundaries of their own penurious lives they had never entertained anything so abstract. […] She dreamt the magazine dream of marriage: herself, stepping out of a car with a plastic shopping bag full of groceries and filling them into the gleaming refrigerator, then rushing to the telephone placed on a lace doily upon a three-legged table and excitedly ringing up her friends to invite them to see a picture show with her and her husband who was beaming at her from behind a flowered curtain.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Sarla

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explores Deven and Sarla's marriage by introducing Sarla through Deven's eyes, and then through her own. Deven's very concept of Sarla's identity is tied to the resentment he feels about their arranged marriage: he struggles to conceive of who she is apart from the ways in which they fail to see eye to eye, and the ways in which she fails to live up to his ideal of a wife. While he knows *about* her material aspirations, he cannot understand *why* she holds them or what they mean to her; conversely, she scarcely understands his dedication to literature and indifference about money. After all, Deven's value system resembles that of the old Delhi aristocracy—meanwhile Sarla's is more typical of modern, globalizing, independent India. She wants the trappings of a comfortable middle-class life, by her contemporary standards: a landline phone, a fridge, and possibly even a car.

All that Deven and Sarla can agree on is that they're a terrible match—and yet they have no choice but to live with each other. And because India is a highly patriarchal society, their marriage allows Deven to pursue his goals more or less independently—while Sarla grows bitter and gradually loses hope in achieving hers. While Desai is not criticizing the gendered division of labor or the institution of arranged marriage altogether, she does show how both ultimately limits women's freedom and opportunities in a way that seems incompatible with the prospect of them becoming equal to men.

❝ Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer. At least Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Sarla

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Deven and Sarla are both miserable with their lives and their marriage, and they both secretly know why. Deven knows that Sarla was hoping for a materially better life than the one she grew up with, but instead ended up with him—a low-paid Hindi teacher. And Sarla knows that Deven wanted to publish his own poetry and live an exciting literary life with an intellectual wife who shares his passion. But instead, he just teaches Hindi in an ordinary regional college. In fact, not only do they recognize that they are miserable in parallel ways: they also both know that they could choose to show each other sympathy, accept one another's misery, and "yoke together their joint disappointments." They could admit that they have failed to live up to each other's expectations and at least take comfort in one another's understanding. But they choose not to because they prefer blame over comfort, the power they derive from their bitterness over the freedom they would gain through solidarity. They choose to remain enemies and continue dreaming of fixing their lives instead of forgiving each other and accepting that reality cannot live up to fantasy. In particular, as a man in traditional, patriarchal Indian society, Deven gets to use his frustrations with Sarla as an excuse to ignore and mistreat her; if he admits the truth that he has

let her down, too, then he will finally be acknowledging her as an equal—and ceding his power over her.

Deven's unrealistic hope that his life will suddenly improve explains his constant pattern of failure throughout the novel: he constantly expects that his life will suddenly start living up to his fantasy of literary greatness, but at every turn, others sense and take advantage of his naivety. Similarly, Sarla keeps waiting for the prosperity that Deven will never bring her—and manages to get annoyed anew every time he fails to bring it.

❝ The flock of parrots wheeled around, perhaps on finding the fields bare of grain, and returned to the tree above their heads, screaming and quarrelling as they settled amongst the thorns. One brilliant feather of spring green fluttered down through the air and fell at their feet in the grey clay. Deven bent to pick it up and presented it to his son who stuck it behind his ear in imitation of his schoolteacher with the pencil. "Look, now I'm masterji," he screamed excitedly.

Yes, that was the climax of that brief halcyon passage. It was as if the evening star shone through at that moment, casting a small pale illumination upon Deven's flattened grey world.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Manu (speaker), Nur , Deven's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter Four, Deven takes his son Manu on a walk down their street, up to the canal that the agricultural college uses to irrigate its lush fields. They see a flock of parrots in a tree and Manu sticks one of their feathers behind his ear, in imitation of his schoolmaster (who does the same with a pencil). Although they don't reach any profound conclusions or even have a particularly significant heart-to-heart conversation, this is still the deepest moment of love and connection in the book. It shows Deven what really matters to him in life, and it foreshadows the novel's conclusion, in which he returns to this same spot, accepts his obligation to carry on Nur's poetic legacy, and discovers the sense of courage that he needs in order to face the college's administration and save his job, so that he can continue to support his family. Of course, the thematic parallel between the two moments is clear: in both cases, Deven takes responsibility for the future. The parrot's feather, a streak of green amidst the grey, represents Deven's insight and his calling: to spread and repeat (or *parrot*) Nur's work.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Who was she? Why should her birthday be celebrated in this manner? How could she claim monopoly of the stage with her raucous singing that now afflicted their ears, her stagey recitation of melodramatic and third-rate verse when the true poet, the great poet, sat huddled and silent, ignored and uncelebrated, Deven asked himself, determinedly not listening with more than a fraction of his attention. She was not worth listening to, he would not listen to her, he had not come to listen to her, he grumbled to himself, and scowled at the spectators who were bobbing their heads, swaying from side to side, beating time with their hands on their knees, giving forth loud exclamations of wonder and appreciation—like puppets, he thought, or trained monkeys.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur , Imtiaz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83-84

Explanation and Analysis

When he finds a crowd assembling for a poetry reading at Nur's house, Deven is excited to finally hear his idol perform—but he is surprised and furious when he learns that the actual performer will be Nur's wife, Imtiaz. He immediately starts justifying his reaction by telling himself that she is not truly reciting poetry, but merely "raucous[ly] singing […] third-rate verse." She is upstaging Nur—"the true poet, the great poet"—and the only appropriate response to this sin is simply to ignore her.

Ironically, then, Deven concludes that Imtiaz's poetry has no value before he even starts listening to it. It's hard enough for Deven to consider that a *woman* could write great poetry. And Deven is outright unwilling to consider that Nur's wife—the very woman who was standing over Nur last time, insulting and ridiculing him—could be as good as him at his own craft. Thus, Deven angrily discounts Imtiaz's work based on prejudice alone and concludes that the people who love her must be something less than human, like "puppets" or "trained monkeys." Later, Deven's sexist animosity toward Imtiaz has grave consequences at the end of the novel, when she offers him exactly what he has been looking for—the unpublished work of an accomplished poet—but he refuses to look at it (and potentially sacrifices

his career in the process) because he doesn't want to consider that she may be as great a poet as Nur.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Fatefully, it was the head of the Urdu department, Abid Siddiqui who, in keeping with the size and stature of that department, was a small man, whose youthful face was prematurely topped with a plume of white hair as if to signify the doomed nature of his discipline. It was perhaps unusual to find a private college as small as Lala Ram Lal's offering a language such as Urdu that was nearly extinct, but it happened that Lala Ram Lal's descendants [...] had to accept a very large donation from the descendants of the very nawab who had fled Delhi in the aftermath of the 1857 mutiny and built the mosque. [...] It was promised a department in which its language would be kept alive in place of the family name.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Murad , Nur , Abid Siddiqui

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100-101

Explanation and Analysis

Abid Siddiqui is a living metaphor for the language he teaches: small, forgettable, and aging, he spends most of his time wandering around the campus because he has no students to teach. After all, Urdu has been on the decline in India since most of its speakers left for Pakistan upon independence, so virtually nobody is studying it. As the narrator explains here, the only reason Lala Ram Lal College teaches Urdu at all is that it's contractually required to, in the honor of a 19th-century *nawab* (Muslim nobleman) who helped fund it. Since this nawab also funded the construction of Mirpore's mosque, he is arguably the only reason the city's Muslims have any monument whatsoever to their history and heritage. Siddiqui is one of his descendants, and, like Nur, he readily admits that his language, profession, and culture are dying. In addition to painting a bleak picture of Urdu's present and future in India, this passage also serves to underline how unlikely, or even absurd, Deven and Murad's plan to save it really is.

Seeing that line waver and break up and come together again upon the sheet of blue paper, Deven felt as if he were seeing all the straight lines and cramped alphabet of his small, tight life wavering and dissolving and making way for a wave of freshness, motion, even kinesis. In openness lay possibilities, the top of the wave of experience surging forward from a very great distance, but lifting and closing in and sounding loudly in his ear. What had happened to the hitherto entirely static and stagnant backwaters of his existence? It was not the small scrawled note, not Siddiqui or Rai or anyone to do with the college who had caused this stir; it was Nur, Nur's poetry and Nur's person.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur , Abid Siddiqui , Mr. Rai

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109-110

Explanation and Analysis

One of Siddiqui's (very few) Urdu students passes Deven a handwritten letter asking him to meet with the registrar, Mr. Rai—presumably because Rai has decided to fund Deven's research program. This passage describes Deven's emotional reaction to the letter, which seems to point the way towards freedom and literary greatness. To understand it, readers must know that Urdu is written in the Persian or Arabic script—usually in a calligraphic form called *Nastaliq*—while Hindi is written in the *Devanagari* script (the script most stereotypically associated with India, in which the letters are connected by a horizontal line on top).

Deven's feeling of wonder, excitement, and possibility is directed as much at the prospect of getting research funding as at the letter's Urdu handwriting itself, with its swooping calligraphy. On the most basic level, the letter is exciting because it proves that at least some young people are still making the effort to learn Urdu. But needless to say, its real meaning to Deven is that Nur's unpublished work is still out there—and he will be the first scholar with a chance to compile it. The note's Urdu contrasts with the "straight lines and cramped alphabet" of Hindi, which represents Deven's boring day job and his failure to achieve his high-minded scholarly goals.

What had made Siddiqui do it?

Nur, of course, the magic name of Nur Shahjahanabadi of course, thought Deven, walking out into the brassy light. It was a name that opened doors, changed expressions, caused dust and cobwebs to disappear, visions to appear, bathed in radiance. It had led him on to avenues that would take him to another land, another element.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur , Abid Siddiqui

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Deven self-righteously ponders why Siddiqui agrees to pass on his plea for funding to the registrar, Mr. Rai. He concludes that, like him, Siddiqui must simply be so moved by Nur's radiant genius that he felt he had no option but to support the project. Of course, Deven has no real proof of this—perhaps Siddiqui is just a generous man, for instance, or perhaps he is just eager to fight for any research that involves Urdu (because, after all, he's the head of the Urdu department). But Deven certainly *wants* to believe that the key is just Siddiqui's love for Nur, because this validates his own feelings about Nur. If Siddiqui will go to great lengths to support research into Nur, then Deven is right to be willing to do almost anything for the man. (Of course, this dedication ends up hurting Deven more than it helps him in the long term, because it leads him to repeatedly put himself in compromising positions and let other people take advantage of him, all in the name of Nur's poetry.) Thus, while Deven is right to think that Siddiqui appreciates Nur's work—Siddiqui has clearly said as much—he distorts this truth by assuming that Siddiqui also worships "the magic name of Nur Shahjahanabadi" as much as he does.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"Before Time crushes us into dust we must record our struggle against it. We must engrave our name in the sand before the wave comes to sweep it away and make it a part of the ocean."

Related Characters: Nur (speaker), Deven Sharma, Imtiaz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

After revealing that his wife Imtiaz is sick (but before sharing his unpublished poetry with Deven) Nur makes this profound, offhand comment about the nature of time and memory—and presumably also the value of research like Deven's. In fact, this quote could even be the mission statement behind Deven's project: he wants to make a record of Nur before it's too late. Soon, Nur will be a relic from a bygone time, but future people deserve to know about his life and work. And even if Deven cannot keep Nur alive forever, at the least, he can "record [Nur's] struggle against [time]"—or Nur's fight to keep alive the Urdu language, the poetic forms in which it most shines, and the noble culture that it represents.

Just as Deven's struggle to develop courage and responsibility in his personal life is really an effort to escape a toxic cycle of inaction and passivity, his call to save Nur's memory is really an attempt to break with the inevitable cycle of history, in which the past always fades into irrelevance, sooner or later. But Nur argues that this is impossible: he compares the flow of time to waves that "sweep […] away" the sand on a beach, as well as anything written on them (history). At most, he suggests, Deven might hope to delay this process of forgetting—but he will never be able to stop it. Perhaps another generation will remember and appreciate Nur's poems, but no writer's work can ever truly be *timeless*. Of course, Nur's comments about the flow of history are also an indirect reference to India's struggle to remember and learn from its traditional past as it attempts to modernize after independence.

"You do not deceive me even if you have thrown dust in his poor weak eyes. I have made my inquiries—I have found out about you, I know your kind—jackals from the so-called universities that are really asylums for failures, trained to feed upon our carcasses. Now you have grown impatient, you can't even wait till we die—you come to tear at our living flesh—"

Related Characters: Imtiaz (speaker), Deven Sharma, Nur

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

When Deven and Nur visit Imtiaz in her room, she gives this brief speech accusing Deven of exploiting Nur and decrying academic literary scholars in general. She argues that Deven

has "come to tear at [her and Nur's] living flesh." She isn't just angry—there's an underlying theory behind this. Namely, she thinks that literary scholarship is inherently parasitic because it depends on the work of writers and poets who don't ultimately benefit from it. In Imtiaz's view, people like Deven are just middlemen who profit off the work of people like herself and Nur, usually once they're already dead and gone. Worse still, scholars like Deven try to become the gatekeepers of correct interpretation; they go around arrogantly telling everyone else what the literature and poetry they read *really* means. Thus, even as Deven claims to be interviewing Nur out of pure adoration for his work, Imtiaz still thinks he is trying to steal control over Nur's work and legacy. Of course, she's certainly also angry and jealous for personal reasons—she wishes Nur gave her the kind of attention he's giving Deven, and she wishes Deven took her poetry as seriously as he takes Nur's (but she knows that he never will because she's a woman). But her deeper worry is that Deven's arrival means the "jackals" of academia have come to turn Nur from a living writer into a dead artifact.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Peering through a crack in the kitchen door, Sarla watched, thinking: is he dead? is he alive? without concern, only with irritation. 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?

Related Characters: Sarla (speaker), Deven Sharma, Manu , Imtiaz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 138-139

Explanation and Analysis

Deven sits in his chair, motionless, overcome with shame about his failing project with Nur and his seeming inability to make any progress in his life in general. Meanwhile, Sarla watches him through the door and makes this remark to herself. It reflects the wide gulf between their views of the world, as well as India's strict gender roles. Sarla points out that wallowing in shame, or "play[ing] at being dead while still alive," is a luxury. Only people who have time, aspirations, and someone else to meet their basic needs can afford to. In India, this means it's mostly men: most Indian women, Sarla included, are too busy sustaining their husbands, sons, and fathers to find the time to sit around idly and complain that things aren't different. (Of course, they certainly feel this way—if Sarla and Imtiaz are at all representative, they covet the freedom and opportunities that men *do* have.) Sarla's life's work is to make Deven's work possible—and so it's particularly pathetic that he goes on complaining about his, all without recognizing what she does for him.

❝ O will you come along with us
Or stay back in the pa-ast?
O will you come along …

Related Characters: Mrs. Bhalla (speaker), Deven Sharma, Nur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

In the early hours of a warm summer morning, Deven restlessly paces around the courtyard of his small house. He musters all his emotional strength and directs it toward feeling sorrier for himself than ever before. He's convinced that his project with Nur will fail, and his career will collapse as a result. His marriage is terrible, and he has little hope of improving it (unless he manages to solve his professional woes first). He feels completely stuck, defined by the problems and bad habits of the past, and unable to find a path to the future he wants.

But just then, Deven's widowed neighbor Mrs. Bhalla and her friends walk past his house on their way to the temple, singing this song—which neatly captures the dilemma that Deven faces. They seem to be calling out to him, daring him to choose between the past and the future. It may seem that choosing the past would mean accepting his familiar, stagnant, unfulfilling life in Mirpore—as he has done so far, even despite his sincere desire to escape it. This would suggest that choosing the future would mean pursuing his research with Nur, even if the odds seem stacked against him. But it isn't so simple. In particular, Deven doesn't face a clear choice between the past and the future. His aspirations for the future revolve around preserving Nur's poetry (the past).

Similarly, readers might interpret Mrs. Bhalla's song as a challenge for India as a whole—will it choose tradition or modernity? But while "com[ing] along with us" might sound

like accepting change, in reality, Mrs. Bhalla and her friends are going to the most traditional place of all: the temple. The complexities around past and future in this passage suggest that the real challenge is not to choose one or the other—after all, such a choice is impossible, since it would amount to turning back time. Instead, Deven's true task is to integrate the past *with* the future: to adapt to circumstances rather than letting them define him, to embrace gradual instead of radical change, and to carry forth Nur's memory while also accepting Urdu's decline.

Later Deven could not understand how it all come about—how he, the central character in the whole affair, the protagonist of it (if Murad were to be disregarded), the one on whom depended the entire matter of the interview, the recording and the memoirs, to which Siddiqui was no more than an accessory, having arrived on the scene accidentally and at a later stage, and in which he played a minor role—how he, in the course of that evening, had relinquished his own authority and surrendered it to Siddiqui who now emerged the stronger while he, Deven, had been brought to his knees, abject and babbling in his helplessness. *How?*

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Murad , Nur , Safiya, Abid Siddiqui

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 153-154

Explanation and Analysis

Deven pathetically begs Siddiqui to help him find more funding for his research, as he needs to pay Safiya to help him rent a room for his interviews. Siddiqui tells him the uncomfortable truth—he's "incapable" of handling things on his own—but coldly agrees to help. While Deven is grateful for Siddiqui's help, he later realizes that he is repeating the same dynamic that defines his friendship with Murad: in asking for help, he ends up relinquishing control completely, which prevents him from achieving what he wants to achieve. He considers the possibility that *this* is why he fails at everything—he is simply too unconfident and eager to please; he quits at the first sign of difficulty, instead of daring to leave his comfort zone.

While readers may or may not fully agree with Deven's characterization of the problem, his admission is clearly a meaningful step forward. After all, it shows that he is finally having some insight into the frustrating cycle that forms the base of the novel's drama: he blindly trusts others, gets betrayed or disappointed, goes home to sulk and dream of things magically improving, but only starts feeling better when he finds a new reason to blindly trust someone else to resolve things. This cycle prevents Deven from truly taking control of his life, and while it is not an easy one to break, he eventually does break it by the end of the novel. This passage is one of the first moments when he realizes that perhaps *he* is the problem—maybe everyone else keeps failing him because he doesn't know whom to trust, and how.

Chapter 9 Quotes

Frantic to make [Nur] resume his monologue now that the tape was expensively whirling, Deven once forgot himself so far as to lean forward and murmur with the earnestness of an interviewer, "And, sir, were you writing any poetry at the time? Do you have any verse belonging to that period?"

The effect was disastrous. Nur, in the act of reaching out for a drink, froze. "Poetry?" he shot at Deven, harshly. "Poetry of the period? Do you think a poet can be ground between stones, and bled, in order to produce poetry—for *you*?"

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur (speaker), Imtiaz , Chiku

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

Deven's tape-recorded interviews with Nur get off to a slow start: Chiku can't figure out how to use the machine, Nur won't talk until he gets rum and biryani, and his followers constantly interrupt the process and change the topic of conversation. Deven struggles to decide whether to direct conversation, and risk angering Nur, or merely let it flow naturally, and risk losing time and tape.

In this passage, Deven works up the courage to directly ask Nur to share his poetry. But even though his heart is in the right place, and this is an important step towards his goal of becoming more decisive, "the effect [is] disastrous." Nur complains that he isn't there to simply "produce poetry"—even though that's exactly why Deven is interviewing him. He compares the request to being

"ground between stones," which echoes his wife Imtiaz's complaint that scholars like Deven are like jackals who scavenge on the flesh of the writers they study. Even if Nur's defensive reaction is a bit exaggerated (and suspicious), he has a point. According to his version of the story, scholars like Deven view poets as something like literature-production machines they can switched on and off at will. But this deprives poetry of its beauty and authenticity—by definition, he suggests, a poet writes at their own behest, not someone else's. (Again, though, this is not totally accurate—after all, many of India's great Urdu poets wrote specifically for their royal benefactors.)

❝ [Nur] broke into a verse that Deven had never heard before, that no one in the room had heard before, that entered into their midst like some visitor from another element, silencing them all with wonder. […] Seizing the book from [Deven], [Nur] wrote in it himself, holding it on his knee, stopping to lick the pencil now and then, peering at the letters with his cataract-filled eyes, while around him the babble broke out again as his audience excitedly discussed this new verse of his. […] This was the audience Nur had always had to try his verses on, Deven saw, revolted by their flattery, and he knelt behind Nur in reverential silence, watching him write, keeping himself apart from the others, the one true disciple in whose safe custody Nur could place his work.

Related Characters: Nur (speaker), Deven Sharma, Chiku

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 183-184

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of their last recording session, Nur finally breaks new ground and starts to recite a new, unpublished poem. Not trusting Chiku and his useless recorder, Deven starts to copy the poem down—and then Nur grabs Deven's notebook and writes it down himself. (While this might not seem unusual in Western poetry, which is largely written for the page, it certainly would be in traditional Indian poetry—including Urdu poetry—which is intended for recitation.)

At last, Deven has what he has come for: new work by Nur, something to publish, and some confirmation that he didn't sink months of his life and put his career on the line for absolutely nothing. Of course, it's still not as much as he hoped for, and it certainly won't save him from the accusation that he misused his college's funds to buy a useless recorder. Worse still, Nur walks out just after this scene, and Deven never sees him again. But at least they part ways on a positive note, having formed a special bond because Deven appreciates Nur's work with a nuance and depth that none of his other followers can match. This is why Deven is delighted to be "the one true disciple in whose safe custody Nur could place his work." Of course, this passage also sets up the novel's closing scene, in which Deven fully comes to terms with the significance of this "custody."

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Deven put up both his hands and pushed him back as far as he could on the small landing, till his back was against the wall. "I can't do that," he hissed, "it is the property of the college."

[…]

Deven went down the wooden staircase as steadily as he could although his knees shook weakly. Murad's perfidy filled him with the iron of resistance and he felt steady, straight. As he reached the foot of the stairs, he heard Murad call over the banisters, "One last time I am offering to help—one last time. Sole rights! Only sole rights!"

Deven went towards the exit without looking back.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Murad (speaker), Nur

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 209-210

Explanation and Analysis

After Nur mails Deven a 500-rupee bill for the brothel room, Deven goes to Delhi to confront Murad, whom he blames for getting him into this entire mess. He asks Murad to cover the bill, or at the very least to pay him for his work, but Murad (characteristically) refuses. Instead, Murad belittles Deven's work, blames the college, and then finally offers to buy the tape from him. (It's not clear why, though, since there's nothing useful on it.) Deven pushes Murad up against the wall, reminds him that his college owns the tape, and boldly walks out.

Deven's reaction is significant: out of a combination of courage and desperation, he *finally* stands up to Murad and insists on getting his due for his time and labor. This is a key

stage in the moral transformation he undergoes in the novel's final pages. Namely, when Deven decides to walk out on Murad, he is finally breaking the toxic cycle of manipulation and exploitation that has bound them together—and that he has long mistaken for a true friendship. The language at the end of their argument makes this particularly clear: Murad phrases his proposal as "offering to help—one last time." Of course, Deven has long valued and depended on Murad's help, and he has long used this help as a way to keep Murad in his life, so that he can keep getting favors from him. But Deven definitively rejects this "last" offer and leaves "without looking back" (without questioning or regretting his decision).

❝ Deven recalled, incongruously enough, the conversation in the canteen with Jayadev, how they had envied their scientist colleagues who had at their command the discipline of mathematics, of geometry, in which every question had its answer and every problem its solution. If art, if poetry, could be made to submit their answers, not merely to contain them within perfect, unblemished shapes but to release them and make them available, then—he thought, then—

But then the bubble would be breached and burst, and it would no longer be perfect. And if it were not perfect, and constant, then it would all have been for nothing, it would be nothing.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur , Imtiaz , Jayadev

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter Ten ends with Deven wandering around Old Delhi and contemplating his conversation with Jayadev about the humanities and sciences. He concludes that poetry's value comes precisely from the fact that it cannot be reduced to a single answer. At first, he wonders if people would value it as highly as science if it *did* "release [answers] and make them available." After all, at least according to Nur and Imtiaz, this is what's wrong with scholars like Deven: they try to "release" a single answer from a poem, to decide what it really means and take ownership over that interpretation. And arguably, this is what he has been doing to Nur's work all along: he was trying to find and publish the secret of Nur's life and poetry, so that he could make a name for himself as a scholar. But now, Deven realizes, maybe Nur and Imtiaz are right—maybe poetry's value lies in its timeless beauty, in the fact that it's possible to return to the same poem time and time again but find different meanings and forms of beauty in its "perfection." This may make it less practical than science, he muses, but perhaps it is not meant to be.

Of course, it's significant that Deven has these thoughts in Old Delhi, which is India's old imperial capital, Urdu's birthplace, and also the area where he grew up. Throughout the novel, Deven associates Indian tradition with art, the past, and Urdu, and modernity with technology, the future, and Hindi and English. Thus, his decision to embrace poetry in Old Delhi also likely represents him taking a stance about India's identity and future. Just like a poem, he suggests, India's traditional culture is more than just the sum of its parts. To reduce it to its literal content, like a history book does, would be to "breach[] and burst" it. This would mean forgetting the rich art, history, and culture that still has powerful meaning for millions of Indians today. While India must develop, Desai suggests, remaking it completely in the name of modern efficiency would amount to destroying its essential identity.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Deven did not have the courage. He did not have the time. 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. It was not for the timid and circumspect to enter that world on a mission of mercy or rescue. If he were to venture into it, what he learnt would destroy him as a moment of lucidity can destroy the merciful delusions of a madman. He could not allow that.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur , Sarla , Imtiaz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter Eleven, Deven receives a fateful letter from Imtiaz, Nur's wife. Imtiaz reveals that she knew all along about Deven's interview recordings and finally tells her and Nur's love story in her own voice—something that has been sorely lacking in the novel so far. She explains that she and Nur fell in love through poetry: she loved his, and he loved hers. Even if Nur is now old and dying, Imtiaz explains, they were true "intellectual companion[s]." (Deven is unlikely to appreciate this, because he thinks of himself as Nur's only true, worthy "intellectual companion.") Imtiaz also includes copies of some of her

poems in the letter, but she writes that she expects Deven to be too cowardly to read them.

Imtiaz is right: as this passage explains, Deven knows that reading Imtiaz's poems and acknowledging her talent would destroy him. On two different levels, it would be tantamount to "a moment of lucidity" that would "destroy the merciful delusions of a madman." First, it would force him to recognize that Imtiaz is as talented a poet as Nur, which would lead him to conclude that he has been spending his time and energy in the wrong place. Had he given Imtiaz the attention she deserved, perhaps he *would* have discovered marvelous unpublished poetry, and perhaps his scholarly career *would* have taken off. And second, on a broader level, recognizing Imtiaz's talent would force Deven to accept that women can be just as accomplished poets as men. This would upend his firm belief in gender hierarchy and likely force him to confront the way he has harmed Sarla by not taking her needs and interests seriously.

> He tried to return to his old idolatry of the poet, his awe of him, his devotion when it had still been pure, and his gratitude for his poetry and friendship, that strange, unexpected, unimaginable friendship that had brought him so much pain.
>
> That friendship still existed, even if there had been a muddle, a misunderstanding. He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into safe custody, and not realized that if he was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too. This alliance could be considered an unendurable burden—or else a shining honour. Both demanded an equal strength.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the novel, Deven struggles to separate his reverence for Nur from the grim truth that their relationship now consists of little more than Nur selfishly harassing Deven for money. While it would be easy for Deven to simply turn against Nur and conclude that the man did not live up to the myth, he chooses a different, more moderate path instead.

Deven decides not to let the bad spoil the good; he accepts that his friendship with Nur didn't live up to his expectations, but he decides that this is just "a muddle, a misunderstanding," compared to their truer, deeper connection as poets and intellectuals. While he can never recover the "pure" "idolatry" and "devotion" he felt for Nur earlier in his life, this doesn't mean he regrets meeting Nur—on the contrary, they now have a more concrete link because they have put one another "in custody." Nur has done so to Deven by saddling him with debts and obligations, and Deven to Nur by becoming the "custodian of [his] genius"—the foremost living expert on his work. Indeed, even though his tapes turned out to be useless, he has one of Nur's unpublished poems in his notebook: he is literally the guardian of Nur's work. And beyond the debts and logistical headaches that he has taken on through his friendship with Nur, he also now has the obligation to nurture and guard Nur's legacy.

With this realization, Deven's feelings about his rocky relationship to Nur shift. He might feel that Nur was exploiting him for money and attention, he realizes, but Nur clearly felt exploited for his poetry, too. They placed burdens on each other, mutually, and yet now their lives, souls, and fates are forever intertwined.

> He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure.
>
> He turned back. He walked up the path. Soon the sun would be up and blazing. The day would begin, with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them. He ran, stopping only to pull a branch of thorns from under his foot.

Related Characters: Deven Sharma, Nur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of *In Custody*, Deven realizes what his relationship with Nur means for his future—and for the challenges he is likely to face over the next day, as he tries to justify his unnecessary research expenses to the college administration and save his job. While he may still feel a deep resentment toward Nur, who has in many ways ruined his life, he also recognizes that he now has the "great distinction" of being the scholar who will carry forth Nur's

legacy more than any other. He literally "accepted the gift" of Nur's new unpublished poem, and now he is the work's "custodian." Even more importantly, he now sees his relationship with Nur as reciprocal: just as Nur has given him both burdens (like debts) and gifts (like the poetry), he has *also* given the same to Nur. (For instance, he has burdened Nur by trying to impose literary analysis on his work and seeding new conflicts in his marriage, but given him the gift of attention, validation, and perhaps greater literary fame in the future.)

But Deven's realization doesn't stop there. Rather, it leads him to think about *himself* differently, too. In fact, it helps him finally overcome the fear and passivity that have held him back throughout the novel. Before, he thought that Nur was exploiting *him*, so he viewed himself as something of a passive victim and blamed Nur, directly or indirectly, for his troubles at work. But now, he recognizes that the reality is more complicated. Deven now sees that he has the obligation to protect "Nur's very soul and spirit," particularly once Nur dies, but his poetry lives on. So now, keeping his job and justifying his research isn't just about saving *himself*—it's also about saving *Nur* and the cultural heritage Nur represents.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Deven Sharma, a Hindi literature lecturer in the small Indian city of Mirpore, is buying cigarettes outside the college where he teaches when a brash old friend, Murad, surprises him by tapping him on the shoulder. Deven is glad to see Murad, but also apprehensive. He agrees to buy Murad lunch after his next class. As they smoke, Murad mocks Deven for buying just two cigarettes. Deven explains that his wife (Sarla) doesn't like him smoking and drinking. Murad loudly asks if they'll drink with lunch. Worried that students will hear, Deven asks Murad to leave. Offended, Murad tells Deven to skip class and complains that he came several hours from Delhi to see him. Deven tells Murad to wait outside, then he dashes off to his classroom and tries to collect himself.

Deven's meeting with Murad in this opening scene sets up the novel's central conflict: Deven struggles to find meaning in his life because he does not know how to integrate his past, present, and future. His personal troubles also serve as a metaphor for India's struggle with national identity in the years after independence. In this passage, the contrast between Deven and Murad is immediately apparent. Deven is a meek, conservative, honest dreamer who has long since given up on his dreams of literary life to settle down, start a family, and take a stable but unglamorous teaching job. Murad is boisterous and decisive, and he's unburdened by family, financial troubles, or any sense of responsibility to others.

As he prepares for his class, Deven tries to figure out why Murad's visit is bothering him. They were close friends as children: Murad was wealthy, and Deven was poor and willing to do favors for him. Even now, Deven barely has any money left to buy Murad lunch. And Murad has plenty: his father is a rich carpet dealer who bought Awaaz, the literary magazine that he now runs. In fact, he published Deven's book review and poem, but he never sent the payment. Deven momentarily wonders if maybe Murad has come to pay up, but then he chastises himself for getting his hopes up and turns to his class. As usual, he mutters poetry to himself while looking at the door. (This is why his students find him boring.) He asks if they've done the reading, and they laugh.

Deven and Murad's childhood friendship helps explain their dynamic throughout the novel: Murad has long taken advantage of Deven, and Deven has long since gotten used to it. Indeed, Deven's attempt to stand up to Murad is a central aspect of his struggle to overcome his cowardice and take control over his own future. Moreover, their different class backgrounds help explain why they took such different paths in life, despite their shared passion for Urdu language and literature. Murad is clearly more enthusiastic about his job than Deven is—even if Murad's failure to pay Deven for his work suggests that he might not seriously care about keeping the Urdu literary and scholarly tradition alive.

At lunch, Murad complains that Mirpore's "village fare" doesn't compare to the food in Delhi. Fortunately, it's loud enough that nobody overhears him—Deven has taken him to a bustling local restaurant near the bus station, as he can't afford a fancy, air-conditioned restaurant. Understanding this, Murad complains that India doesn't pay its teachers enough or show them the respect they deserve. With uncharacteristic boldness, Deven says that his situation might change if he got paid for his articles. Scowling, Murad complains that running his magazine is expensive, and its subject, Urdu literature, isn't popular anymore.

Murad's arrogant, unpredictable behavior makes it increasingly clear that he has come to get something from Deven, and not just to reminisce about old times. His comments about Mirpore's food are a shallow way of pulling rank by pointing out that he comes from the capital. And his phony complaints about the expenses involved in running a magazine are an obvious attempt to distract from Deven's legitimate claim to the money the magazine owes him. Deven tries and fails to stand up to Murad—but this foreshadows a crucial moment in the novel's second-to-last chapter, when he finally succeeds.

Deven agrees that it's important to keep the Urdu literary tradition alive. Murad laments that Urdu was once the language of royalty and government but is now dying and being replaced by Hindi, the "language of peasants." Deven says he wishes he could work for Murad's journal, but he has to provide for himself and his wife Sarla. So, Hindi will remain his profession and Urdu just a hobby. Murad angrily comments that Deven should be as dedicated to Urdu as *he* is, and then he asks if Deven will write something for his upcoming issue on Urdu poetry. Deven melts with pride: Urdu is his mother tongue and "his first love."

The foundation of Deven and Murad's bond is their shared love for Urdu, whose one-time prominence and quick decline in postcolonial India are familiar subjects to any South Asian reader. Still, the Hindi-Urdu controversy can be difficult for uninitiated readers to understand because, on the one hand, Hindi and Urdu are almost exactly the same language, but on the other, they have significant political consequences and intense personal meaning for their speakers. Murad deliberately explains his dedication to Urdu in terms that associate Deven with Hindi, thereby putting him down. The crucial fact that Murad is Muslim, but Deven is Hindu, adds insult to injury. But Deven points out that his job as a Hindi teacher is just further proof of Urdu's decline—if there were opportunities in Urdu, after all, he would be teaching it.

Deven asks if Murad will print his poems. But Murad says no: "Who wants to read your poems?" Murad will only print poetry by the absolute best Urdu poets, such as the legendary Nur (whom Murad nominates for the Nobel Prize every year). Old and frail, Nur has stopped working, but Murad is determined to wait until he writes something new. In the meantime, Murad wants Deven to write a feature *about* Nur. In fact, Deven wrote a whole book about Nur, but nobody has ever been willing to publish it; he asks if Murad will, and Murad says absolutely not. Murad tells Deven to find Nur at his home in Delhi's Chandni Chowk, interview him, and ask him for some new work. Deven remembers that Nur is famously reclusive and doesn't like visitors, but he agrees.

Desai introduces the core of the novel's plot: Deven's quest to meet, interview, and understand his idol, Nur. In the process, Murad reveals that he really did have an ulterior motive for visiting Deven—and his lack of candor suggests that there are many more twists and turns to come. Indeed, it raises the question of whether he is really sending Deven to interview Nur in order to save Urdu—or just because he sees financial opportunity in it. This question will only grow more and more pressing over the course of the novel. After all, Murad's refusal to publish Deven's work is baffling because it suggests that he doesn't actually care very much about Urdu's future—after all, it's impossible to save a language by refusing to publish new writers.

CHAPTER 2

As soon as his bus leaves town, Deven feels like he's suddenly free from "indestructible prison" of life in Mirpore. Ramshackle and always covered in a thick layer of dust, the city is hundreds of years old, but has little to show for it besides the dilapidated 19th-century mosque in the bazaar and the old temples whose history nobody knows. Mirpore has no river, just a filthy reservoir, and it's divided between the mostly Muslim area near the mosque and the majority-Hindu rest of the city. Sometimes religious tensions flare up, like when Hindu and Muslim festivals fall on the same day, but everyone usually forgets and moves on.

The fictional city of Mirpore, which resembles many ordinary Indian cities in the region around Delhi, serves as a metaphor for Deven's stagnant, unfulfilling life. In the city, as in Deven's life, the passage of time brings degradation and disappointment, not positive change or freedom. The past lives on in the city, but people do not bother to make a point of remembering it. Indeed, in describing Mirpore, Desai emphasizes the fraught politics of religion in north India, which has become dominated by its Hindu majority since independence. Mirpore's crumbling, forgotten mosque represents the way that Islam and the culture surrounding it—including the Urdu language—have lost their glory in north India.

Mirpore's city center is home to schools (like the one where Deven teaches), government buildings, and the railway and bus stations, which constantly shuttle people through town to Delhi. The city is always bustling, but it has no real industry, and nothing changes there from year to year. This is why Deven has always felt trapped there, and why he feels so relieved when his bus makes its way out of town.

Desai paints Mirpore as bustling yet soulless: like the waves in a stormy sea, it's constantly moving on the surface, but at a deeper level, it's actually empty and still. Moreover, while motion might evoke freedom, change, and the future, stillness represents captivity, tradition, and the past. Thus, Desai suggests that the relationship between freedom and captivity—or custody—is not as simple as it may appear.

The bus enters the small stretch of countryside separating Mirpore from Delhi. Scattered with small factories and full of acrid smoke, it feels like the "strip of no-man's land that lies around a prison." Deven remembers how insulted he felt when his in-laws bought him the cheap green shirt he's wearing now. He realizes that he doesn't feel like he's about to meet his idol and do something great.

The countryside's smoky factories represent modernization's pernicious effects: rather than freeing India from its poverty and misery, modern industry has merely polluted it, destroying formerly pristine countryside. Like Mirpore's failure to truly change, this is also a metaphor for Deven's sense that he is a failure.

The passenger next to Deven babbles on about going to Delhi for his nephew's first birthday. Suddenly, the bus swerves to avoid a dog but hits it anyway, shocking the passengers. Deven once again asks himself how he can reconcile his meager day-to-day life with his great literary aspirations. As he watches crows fly over to feed on the dog's body, his neighbor starts talking about how the dog is lucky and death is a blessing. Deven suddenly recites some lines from Nur, who compares life to a long funeral procession. His neighbor is impressed and calls him a poet, but Deven dourly replies that he's just a teacher. The other man starts chatting about rising prices and the harvest with someone else instead.

The other passenger represents the kind of routine, unremarkable life that Deven long dreaded leading—but has ended up with, nonetheless. While meeting Nur may finally enable him to live out his grand literary ambitions, it also reminds him how little he has achieved at present: he is nothing more than an insignificant teacher in an insignificant college in an insignificant city. The dog's death and the lines from Nur's poem both strongly suggest that Deven is headed toward his death.

Deven starts to worry that Murad is cheating him and has sent him on a fool's errand. Upon arriving in Delhi, he lingers in the bus terminal for a long time, anxious about his interview and worried that Nur will see him as a clown. As he smokes a cigarette, a shop owner talks him into buying a glass of chai. When he finishes it, he notices a dead fly at the bottom of the glass. He's disgusted, but he also can't help but feel like it and the stray dog are omens for "death itself."

Deven is overwhelmed with feelings of powerlessness: he senses that he lacks control over his life because he has neither the will nor the resources to assert himself and stand up to people like Murad. Death, this chapter's dominant motif so far, returns again—now even more explicitly. In addition to foreshadowing Deven's sense that his past self dies forever when he meets Nur, it also represents Nur himself and the Urdu language, which are fast approaching their deaths.

Deven finds the old, rundown building where Murad works. But before he can go inside, Murad sprints down the stairs, meets him at the entrance, and declares that they have to hurry to lunch and then to their appointment with Nur. Deven explains that he already ate, and Murad silently leads him off into the afternoon crowd instead. He stops at an electrician's shop, where he argues with the shopkeeper about a botched repair job. When Deven asks about the hurry, Murad says there isn't one: Nur is an old man with nothing to do. Even after decades of friendship, Deven still finds Murad's "interior kaleidoscope" of mood swings baffling and infuriating. Murad admits that he doesn't even know where Nur lives—just that it's somewhere in Chandni Chowk.

Murad's dishonest, inconsistent behavior raises serious doubts about his true motives for hiring Deven. At the same time, he doesn't appear to gain anything from manipulating and lying to Deven—instead, he seems to enjoy doing it for its own sake. When he runs downstairs, this suggests that he doesn't want Deven to come inside his office—if he really has one at all.

A naked *sadhu* (holy man) with a python around his neck approaches Deven with a begging bowl. Deven gives the man a coin, dodges the snake, and runs ahead to catch up with Murad, who makes fun of him for being afraid. Murad declares that he's in a rush: he has to get back to the office, he says, and Deven should stop acting like a baby and go find Nur on his own. Frustrated, Deven reminds Murad that he came to Delhi specifically so that Murad could bring him to Nur's house. Deven yells that he at least needs Nur's address, and Murad tells him not to scream like an uncivilized villager. He tells Deven to follow him to his office so that he can write out a letter of invitation, and Deven reluctantly agrees.

Deven's reaction to the sadhu only underlines how weak-willed he is: even though he barely has any money, he gives some to the sadhu out of fear and a sense of religious obligation. (Readers should remember that Deven is Hindu, while Murad is Muslim.) Above all, Deven appears unsuited to the rough-and-tumble of life in Delhi, which appears to be full of fraudsters like Murad, who are willing to do anything to get ahead. Readers might feel anger or frustration on Deven's behalf and wonder why he isn't firmer with Murad. Perhaps he simply knows that Murad will always be more stubborn than he is, or perhaps he cares so much about meeting Nur that he is willing to put up with Murad's manipulativeness for the time being.

Deven remembers how, when they were kids, Murad would drive him crazy by calling him outside to join a cricket match and then insisting he didn't want to play. Clearly, he hasn't changed at all. Deven follows him through the bazaar back to his office, where he and two assistants work in a messy, cramped corner behind a noisy printing press. It's an unimpressive sight, but Deven is still astonished that it exists at all. Murad introduces him to V.K. Sahay, who owns the printing press, and complains that he doesn't have enough space. (Sahay explains that he's busy printing school textbooks.)

Deven's memories from childhood show that his problem clearly isn't *a failure to recognize Murad's behavior as coercive, controlling, and opportunistic. Rather, it's figuring out what to* do *about this behavior. After all, Deven clearly benefits from his friendship with Murad, who has the money and connections that he lacks. Over the course of the book, readers will notice this pattern repeating itself: Deven laments how others take advantage of him, but he doesn't realize that* he *is taking advantage of other people, too. Meanwhile, Murad's office is clearly underwhelming—which underlines how marginal Urdu literature has become to the Indian public. But it also becomes clear that Murad wasn't actually trying to hide his office from Deven, which just adds to the sense of confusion that envelops this scene.*

Murad stands over his desk and writes out Deven's introduction letter. But Deven wonders whether Nur will take Murad's word seriously at all. Murad tells his office boy to guide Deven to Chandni Chowk, then gives Deven the letter with a mysterious wink. Deven leaves the lunch Sarla prepared him at Murad's office and follows the boy away.

Murad's behavior is so unpredictable that it's impossible to know whether his introduction letter means anything at all. As Deven's sense of frustration and demoralization come to the fore, it's easy to forget that he has come to Delhi primarily because of his burning desire to meet Nur.

CHAPTER 3

Deven follows Murad's office boy through the suffocating, nightmarish maze of Chandni Chowk, past textile shops and food stands, astrologers' booths and jewelry lanes. Just when Deven stops the boy and insists that Nur cannot possibly live here, a cycle rickshaw full of packages almost crashes into him. The packages fall and the boy helps replace them while the driver curses Deven. They continue on into a fetid-smelling alley next to an ayurvedic hospital. The boy insists on stopping for tea and rest, but Deven angrily refuses.

The Chandni Chowk bazaar is the heart of Old Delhi, the part of the city built under the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. Its symbolic importance is immense: it was the Indian capital's commercial heart for centuries, as well as the birthplace of the Urdu language and its literary tradition. In this sense, it represents the core of the old, precolonial Indian tradition and identity that Nur's work (and the Urdu language) represents. Desai's description of the area also deepens the atmosphere of chaos, danger, and mystery that Murad's erratic behavior helped establish in the last chapter. Notably, it strongly contrasts with her depiction of Mirpore: even though both are chaotic and dirty, Chandni Chowk is full of life, art, and commerce, while Mirpore is dying, soulless, and economically stagnant. This contrast only underlines the sense that Delhi holds the solution to Deven's troubles.

They turn into another lane, where the boy bangs on a faded, nondescript door. Someone calls down from the windows above, declaring that only "a great fool" would disturb an elderly man's afternoon rest. Convinced that this must be Nur, Deven joyously calls back that he *is* a fool. A woman opens the door; Deven enters the building courtyard and then sprints up the stairs. He is thrilled: Nur is like a god to him, and he's convinced that his life is going to change forever. He opens an upstairs door to a dimly lit room with ugly green tile walls, a single armchair, a rickety table, and a vast pile of tattered books. The poet, an imposing, bearded man dressed in all white, is reclining on a divan, immobile like a marble statue.

After the meaningless madness of Murad and the bazaar, Nur's call down to Deven seems like a lightning bolt of substance. Not only has Deven finally reached his objective, but Nur also speaks with a clarity, honesty, and decisiveness that nobody else seems able to match. Deven is so relieved and thrilled to hear Nur's voice that he inadvertently insults himself. *He may think he is praising Nur's intelligence by calling himself a fool in comparison, but ironically, what he's actually doing is foreshadowing the way that so many other people—including Nur—take advantage of him over the course of the novel. Lastly, when he praises Nur by comparing him to a marble statue, he is alluding to the greatest architectural achievements of Islamic India (like the Taj Mahal). The clear implication is that Nur's poetry is* also *a wondrous, timeless achievement.*

Nur asks who sent Deven to disturb him. Deven pulls out Murad's letter, and the poet asks him to read it aloud. He does, even though it's full of Murad's shallow attempts at flattery. Nur calls the letter-writer a "joker" and asks if Deven is "part of his circus." Deven says no—he just writes for Murad's magazine. Deven explains the feature he's writing on Urdu poetry and debates whether to reveal that he has already written a whole monograph on Nur's work. Somehow, everything is silent outside.

Nur demands that Deven explain his identity and prove his worth—understandably, it seems that he doesn't have time for "joker[s]" who don't take poetry seriously and who fail to recognize the glory of Urdu. (Of course, this scene ends up looking ironic because this perception turns out to be deeply misleading.) Deven is embarrassed that his only way of proving his identity is through recourse to Murad, but to his relief, Nur immediately recognizes that Murad is more a dishonest businessman than a true poet.

Nur asks how there can be Urdu poetry if the Urdu language is already dead and buried. Deven insists that he and Murad are trying to keep the language alive. But he also admits that he teaches Hindi, not Urdu. Deven explains that he grew up speaking Urdu with his father, who died when he was young. He ended up studying and teaching Hindi to make a living, but Urdu is his true passion. Nur calls Deven unworthy of Urdu and tells him to sit.

Nur's passionate lecture about Urdu's fate confirms Deven and Murad's complaints in the first chapter: Urdu no longer has any power in independent India. It is demoralizing that even a master Urdu poet cannot see the language's future. Next, Deven's explanation gives the reader more insight into why he, an ordinary Hindu, speaks and cares so much about Urdu, a traditionally Muslim language. The language is his main connection to his late father, and it is thus central to his sense of identity and masculinity.

Nur speaks a line from one of his poems about suffering, and then Deven starts confidently reciting the rest of the poem, which was one of his father's favorites. Surprised, Nur laughs and compliments Deven's pronunciation. As he recites, Deven he feels a divine kind of intimacy, peace, and self-awareness.

Deven finally proves to Nur that he's serious about Urdu and poetry. This shared recitation looks like the start of a fruitful partnership, but as in so many other moments in this novel, looks are deceiving: this turns out to be the most meaningful, intimate moment that Deven and Nur ever share.

A servant boy (Ali) enters the room with tea, interrupting the scene, and several other people rush up the stairs. Mayhem ensues. The boy gives Deven a scalding metal cup of tea, a baby starts crying, and several young men start demanding money from Nur and making racy jokes. Scandalized, Deven starts to leave, but Nur stops him and says they will go to the balcony instead. He gets angry when Deven doesn't know bring his cushions and pillow along, and he sends the servant boy to do it. All the while, he complains about his age and his piles (hemorrhoids).

The chaos of the Chandni Chowk bazaar floods into Nur's house, turning the scene upside down and challenging Deven's expectations about Nur. Specifically, Deven is surprised to see someone he views as sacred (the great poet Nur) in a situation he views as profane (a boisterous crowd of ordinary Indians, who seem to lack his reverence for Nur and his work). But given that Nur takes him outside, it seems that Nur finds the crowd bothersome, too. When Nur gets angry at Deven for forgetting his pillow, this frustrates Deven because Nur seems to have suddenly forgotten the beauty of poetry—and their shared love for it. Indeed, Nur's health concerns humanize him, showing that he's no different from any other old man. But Deven doesn't want to see Nur, his idol, as human—instead, he long imagined Nur as superhuman, a kind of vessel for divine intelligence, who dedicated his every thought, action, and minute to poetry.

Deven follows Nur outside and sees a flock of birds swarm around the old man and start picking at his bald head. Nur calmly has Ali feed the pigeons, and they leave him alone. Deven asks if Nur is alright; Nur comments that birds usually inspire poets but are now threatening one. Inspired, Deven tries to make a profound comment, but instead meekly asks if Nur will agree to the interview. Suddenly, "an ancient gnome of a man" shows up at the terrace, eases Nur down onto a couch, and starts aggressively massaging him. Between his grunts and cries, Nur chats about professional wrestling with the man, who soon leaves.

Nur's attachment to pigeons is another sign of his deep roots in Delhi's old Islamic traditions, as pigeon-keeping was famously a popular pastime among India's Mughal emperors and the elite that surrounded them. Deven's failure to make a profound comment again shows how his real life falls far short of his ambitions—which, of course, is the same thing that happened during his meeting with Nur. Finally, Nur's massage and chat about wrestling combine these two tendencies. On the one hand, wrestling (pehlwani) *was an important part of Mughal high culture, so it shows that Nur is deeply rooted in the dying world of traditional Delhi. But on the other, Deven is frustrated to see that Nur seems to care less about his poetry than about everyday hobbies like wrestling.*

The servant boy (Ali) brings Nur inside to take a bath. Deven sits down, frustrated that everyone is ignoring him. But just then, people pour out from the building to the terrace, where they watch the sun set above and the bazaar light up for the night below. Surrounded by the crowd, Deven debates whether to go home or keep waiting to interview Nur—which seems impossible amid this chaos.

Deven doesn't understand why an extraordinary poet like Nur would choose to spend time with an ordinary crowd of ordinary people, instead of immersed in the greatness of poetry. Readers will notice that this dynamic reflects Deven's disappointment in his own life: he wants the people around him to understand poetry's beauty, and the world around him to reflect it. But this doesn't happen. Poetry simply can't shape the world in the way Deven hopes—even the most storied poets, like Nur, are just ordinary people who carry on ordinary day-to-day lives. And if Nur is so ordinary, then Deven has little hope of being anything else.

Soon, Nur returns from his bath and starts chatting with his rowdy visitors, who jubilantly drink, banter, and recite poetry. They remind Deven of his bohemian friends from college. Deven is shocked: he expected Nur to be living the refined, secluded life of a scholar, not to be partying with "clowns and jokers and jugglers." Laying on his sofa, Nur drinks cup after cup of rum, and then starts to eat gluttonously. He scarfs down handful after handful of biryani and kebabs, which spill all over his clothes. (Ali tries and fails to clean up after him.) Someone hands Deven a plate of the greasy food, which he worries will upset his stomach. Suddenly, Nur looks over and asks if Deven likes Delhi's royal cuisine better than the food at his college canteen. Deven starts to dig in.

To Deven's astonishment, not only does the disorderly crowd from the bazaar invade Nur's house, but Nur starts to willingly mix with it. In fact, the visitors appear to be his friends and followers. Among Delhi literary circles, this suggests, Murad's kind of personality and behavior is actually more typical than Nur's. Above all, this party scene shows that Deven has long had an idealistic, one-dimensional view of Nur: he thought of Nur as just a poet and never a complex, multifaceted man with varied interests and relationships. He also never considered that Nur might have serious flaws and shortcomings (like his gluttony). Notably, Nur's greasy, meaty meal belongs to the Mughlai cuisine of north India's traditional Muslim rulers. Throughout the novel, Desai contrasts this kind of food with light ("Hindu") vegetarian food, which Deven usually eats—and which Murad mocked in the first chapter.

Deven watches while the visitors recite poetry, act out stories, and argue in front of Nur. He doesn't understand how Nur finds the energy to deal with them, or the concentration to write poetry when he lives in such a bustling bazaar. But actually, Nur *is* talking about poetry: he announces that his visitors are reciting mere nursery rhymes, not true poetry that would revitalize Urdu and defeat Hindi. One man tells Nur to save Urdu through journalism, not poetry, but another calls this idea hopeless. The conversation seems canned, as though it repeats every night, and nobody has ever changed anyone else's mind.

Readers may find it ironic that Deven sees Nur's poetic vocation as incompatible with a bohemian lifestyle. But Deven specifically associates Urdu poetry with the high culture of Old Delhi's royal courts, where it originated, and the formal recitation style in which it is traditionally performed. Nur's guests clearly seem to care about Urdu—they just don't seem to respect its traditions. And while their conversation does seriously focus on the importance of saving Urdu, it also strikes Deven as empty—like they are declaring their political allegiances as part of a performance, but not in order to actually do anything about Urdu's decline.

Nur interrupts to announce that everyone is wrong: the problem is not Hindi versus Urdu, but *time*. Deven feels a sense of relief and remembers why he loves poetry: men like Nur know how to put everything in perspective and restore a sense of calm. Deven gets lost in thought, then notices Nur pointing at him. Nur asks Deven to recite his (Nur's) poetry, but Deven is shocked and struggles to speak. Nur mocks him for teaching the "safe, simple Hindi language."

Desai uses Nur's interruption to bring the reader's attention back to her novel's central ideas: literature can transform people's lives by expanding their sense of possibility, and historical and cultural change are inevitable—no matter how deeply we are attached to the past that they replace. Ironically, though, Nur seems not to practice what he preaches: he criticizes Deven for becoming a Hindi teacher, even though Deven did so because, in post-independence India, it was the most practical way to dedicate his life to literature and pursue his interest in Urdu.

A tall man interrupts to declare that Hindi poetry is vibrant and recite an unimaginative short poem about nature. Nur declares that even film songs are better than this poem, and he yells at Ali to go wake up his son and have him sing. The tall man angrily kicks a stack of used metal plates across the terrace; someone throws his glass on the ground, shattering it. Another man starts crying because a film director stole a song he wrote.

Once again, after a brief moment of respite, the party descends further into chaos. Desai intentionally leaves it ambiguous whether the tall man is praising or mocking the poem that he recites. This reflects Deven's discomfort and uncertainty amidst the crowd—after all, Nur has alternatingly praised and mocked Deven, too. And Nur's reply makes it clear that, despite all his wise thoughts about time and change, he ultimately sees Hindi replacing Urdu as a symbol of India's cultural decline in general. In other words, he's not just against the Hindi language— he's against modernity altogether.

While the revelers chatter on, Nur quietly disappears into the house. Put off by the crowd and hoping he will finally get an interview, Deven follows him inside. But he's shocked at what he sees, and he tries to avoid remembering it ever again. He hears a child cry, a woman shriek, and Nur mumble downstairs. Following the sound, he finds Nur face-down on a mattress while his wife (Imtiaz) screams at him. Nur has vomited all over her floor. He blames his stomach ulcers, but she blames his drinking.

It's significant that this section opens with Deven not wanting to remember the shameful scene that he witnesses. In addition to framing the reader's expectations for the scene, this also highlights the way that our beliefs and ideas depend on our memory—which is far from neutral or objective. Clearly, Deven doesn't want to remember this scene because it shows him that Nur is not a perfect, saintly idol but rather an ordinary, pathetic man. But readers must also decide what the unreliability of memory means for Deven and Nur's memories of Urdu's glorious past: to what extent do they miss it because it was real, and to what extent do they use it as a convenient fantasy to feel better about their failures in the present?

Deven embraces Nur, but in an angry tirade, Imtiaz says that, if Deven loves Nur so much, *he* can clean up the vomit. Nur's followers pretend to worship him, she continues, but they just want free food and drink. Deven declares he has come to pay his respects to a great poet, but Nur's wife accuses Deven and the other revelers of reducing Nur to a gluttonous, vile animal who is barely able to work. Deven knows that she's right, even as she starts throwing books and papers at him. He notices her son crying in the corner of the room and then starts cleaning up the vomit in the corner with a wad of papers. Nur and his wife keep arguing; when she looks away, Deven runs outside with the vomit-soaked paper.

It appears that Nur went downstairs to try and wake up his son to force him to sing. But instead, he fell to the floor and vomited everywhere. Realizing this, readers will likely see Imtiaz's fury as justified—even though Deven struggles to accept the dissonance between his perception of Nur and the reality. Indeed, in this scene, the novel turns the reader's gaze to women's perspective for the first time (of many) in this novel. In short, the novel shows how the "great man" theory of success—or viewing accomplished men as singular geniuses who are superior to the rest of humanity—gives those men a justification for irresponsible, controlling, or abusive behavior toward their families.

Deven waits out on the verandah, unsure what to do, as Nur and Imtiaz continue arguing inside. After some time, following his instincts, he runs down the stairs and out into the street. He dumps the paper in the gutter and runs off. Then, he realizes that Nur may have written poetry on those papers. Besides the moment when he heard Nur and his wife's voices from upstairs, this is the other memory that sticks with Deven. He doesn't want to admit that he abandoned his idol, defaced his poetry, and ran away.

Deven's sudden escape reflects his cowardice and disappointment: he is not willing to face the uncomfortable truth that Nur has fallen fall short of his expectations. He is not a perfect, moral sage, but rather a miserable, depraved shell of a man. The vomit-soaked poems represent this contradiction between expectations and reality—which, in turn, reflects Deven's feelings about his own life and career. In short, the truth about Nur suggests that Deven's entire career is built on a lie.

CHAPTER 4

By daybreak, Deven's bus is approaching dreary Mirpore. Deven remembers how poets describe the dawn, but after his nightmarish evening with Nur, he concludes that poets are all liars. He groans and watches the passing scenery. Although he's exhausted, he worries that the previous night will haunt him if he falls asleep. Above all, he feels guilty for defacing Nur's poetry, something he dearly loves. A milkman offers him chewing tobacco to clear his head, but he curtly refuses. When the bus finally pulls into the station. Deven stands to disembark, then unexpectedly locks eyes with one of his students, who is riding by on a bicycle. After waiting on the bus for a long time, Deven decides to head straight to work instead of going home to Sarla.

Deven's disappointment in Nur mixes with his sense of guilt about becoming the representative for Nur's hedonistic, partying friends in Imtiaz's eyes. He finds it easier to blame himself and give up his faith in poetry than to accept the difficult truth that terrible men can produce brilliant art—and he has spent his whole life worshipping one such man. In fact, when he decides not to go home to Sarla, who is sure to be worried and disappointed, this is another version of the same principle: when faced with his actions' effects on other people, he chooses not to look. Of course, it's no coincidence that the consequences of these men's denial falls on their wives and children. Ultimately, at the end of the book, Deven's personal transformation will depend on him finally overcoming this tendency to denial—he accepts the reality of who Nur is, who he has become, and what it will mean to be the custodian of Nur's work.

That afternoon, when Deven finally makes it home, he finds Sarla chatting with their widowed neighbor Mrs. Bhalla by the front door. Mrs. Bhalla comments that her nephew saw Deven getting off the morning bus, and Deven should have sent Sarla a message. Sarla covers her hair with her sari and leads Deven inside without saying a word. Deven knows that she's punishing him but feels that she's right to: he deserves this dusty city, shabby house, and loveless marriage, not "the world of drama and revolving lights and feasts and furies" he encountered in Delhi.

Among Hindu women, covered hair is a traditional sign of seriousness—like mourning or piety. This is why Deven views Sarla's covered hair as a form of punishment: she uses it to suggest that something is wrong, without saying anything. Indeed, like Mrs. Bhalla's comment, the novel's portrayal of Sarla shows how woman in highly patriarchal societies can use subtle, indirect tactics to assert their will and resist men's authority because they have little power to get what they want directly. Of course, this contrasts with the way Imtiaz stood up to Nur at the end of the last chapter. Their conflict is just the kind of situation Deven fears, in which men's unspoken dominance over women starts to fade.

When Deven and Sarla married, he still thought of himself as a poet, not a teacher. Sarla, whom his family chose for him, was "plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic." But she also dreamed of buying modern comforts like a phone, fridge, and car—none of which Deven could afford on a lecturer's salary in a second-rate provincial town. Now, her face is stuck in a permanent scowl, for she is as disappointed in her life as Deven is in his. So as to punish her for her disappointment in him, Deven throws a tantrum every time her food isn't perfect or she falls behind on the laundry.

Deven views the intellectual world of art and ideas, where he lives most of his life, as inherently superior to the common world of domestic work and consumption, where Sarla lives hers. They seem unable to communicate between their two worlds, so much so that they don't even try to bridge the gap. They take their unhappiness out on each other instead of coming together to build a more satisfying life for themselves—while they pity each other, they also secretly relish in letting the other down. This is why, although Deven feels sorry for falling short of Sarla's expectations, he has no intention of changing for her sake—nor does she for him.

Deven sits on the veranda and calls for his son, Manu, to come over with his schoolbooks. Surprisingly, Sarla repeats this request to Manu, which suggests that Deven's "punishment period" has already ended. Manu brings over his workbooks, and Deven is dismayed to see them filled with poor handwriting and low grades. He wants to chastise Manu, but knows Sarla is listening. Instead, he asks what Manu is reading—it's an ordinary children's book with rhyming stories about animals. This reminds Deven of three powerful images: Nur's disgusted, enraged face; Nur on the ground, writhing in pain; and his own father, emaciated and terminally ill, laying on the floor and reading Nur's poems.

Sarla and Deven's argument ends before it ever really begins, and Deven turns his attention to the family member he actually cares about: his young son Manu. The novel links this scene of them reading together—most likely from the famous Panchatantra, *a well-known Sanskrit book of fables—to Deven's precious few memories of his own father, who died when he was young. Crucially, Deven's love for Urdu poetry is in part a stand-in for his love for his father (who taught him about it). But he is reading a Sanskrit text with his son, which again points to Hindi and Hindu culture's rising prominence in modern India. Indeed, the rest of this chapter makes it clear that Deven's relationships with his father and his son are really foils for one another: Deven wants to give his son the love, belonging, and moral guidance that he never got from his father (except through poetry.)*

Startled, Deven takes Manu out for a walk. They head down the road, past the neighbors' similarly shabby houses, with their peeling paint, drying clothes, wandering chickens, and blasting radios. After his night in Delhi, for the first time, he is actually content with the life he has built for himself and his family. He is glad to have left behind the horrifying moral ambiguity of his encounter with Nur, and to return to the simple innocence of family life.

Mirpore seemed dreary and uninspiring when the novel first described it at the beginning of Chapter Two. But now, Deven's unassuming, working-class Indian neighborhood seems like a kind of paradise, far removed from the evils of the city. Indeed, Deven's constant references to the previous night reveal the other main reason he wants to spend quality time with Manu: he doesn't want to be like Nur, whose relationship with his son is clearly awful. (After all, Nur woke up his son in the middle of the night with the intention of forcing him to sing for a crowd of drunk poets—but ended up collapsing on the floor and throwing up in front of him instead.)

Manu is enjoying his walk with Deven, too. He is talking about his schoolmaster, who has hair coming out of his ears and likes to stick pencils behind them. And Deven is actually listening—he genuinely wants to spend time with Manu, and vice versa. (Sarla only ever takes Manu out when she has errands to do.)

Even though their conversation goes no deeper than small talk about school, Deven and Manu both feel genuinely wanted and valued. Notably, this is completely different from the way they feel around Sarla, which again underlines how men and women's worlds are completely separate in many traditional Indian families.

Deven and Manu walk past the end of the road, down the clay path towards the agricultural college's lush, fertilized fields. Deven points out a flock of **parrots**, and Manu sings a nursery rhyme about a parrot. Deven remembers his own father teaching him that rhyme, and he realizes that he has become a disappointment to Sarla, just like his invalid father was to his mother. The parrots land on a nearby tree and one of their feathers falls to the ground. Deven picks it up, and Manu sticks it behind his ear, like his schoolmaster. The evening feels perfect.

Deven's moment of connection with his son shows him that he may be pursuing happiness in the wrong place: family life might actually be more rewarding than literary greatness.

But everything changes when they get home. Sarla grumpily hands Deven a postcard for him—which she has obviously read. It's from Nur, thanking Deven for "your decision to work as my secretary" and asking him to report to Delhi at once.

The novel's recurring cycles of crisis continue: as soon as Deven decides that he doesn't need literary fame to feel satisfied, Nur pops back up in his life. Needless to say, Deven never offered to be Nur's "secretary." Murad has clearly pulled some tricks behind his back.

CHAPTER 5

Deven and Murad are sitting in Murad's Delhi office. Murad complains that Deven says no to everything, and Deven explains that he can't possibly give up his job, life, and family to become Nur's secretary. So, Murad tells Deven to "go back to [his] village" and "rot with your buffaloes and your dung heaps." He insists that many other poets would happily take the job, and that Deven is disrespecting the Indian tradition of apprentices learning from gurus. Deven declares that he has given up on being a poet and doesn't need a guru.

Once again, Murad uses every insult and argument he can think of to pressure Deven into lending his time and energy, all against his better judgment. Specifically, Murad plays on Deven's love for literature by suggesting that his life only has value if he sacrifices his normal obligations to spend time with Nur. (But Deven doesn't just have "buffaloes" and "dung heaps" in his village: he has his family, his job, and his home.) People with artistic inclinations may be familiar with this tension between everyday obligations and a creative calling—and, quite possibly, people who try to shame them into working for free by promising them greatness (like Murad).

Deven demands to know why Murad offered his services to Nur as a secretary. Murad insists that he didn't—he just ran into Nur, who asked if Deven was returning for the interview. But Deven doesn't believe a word Murad says, and he points out that the word "secretary" never once came up in his conversation with Nur. Murad complains that Deven blames other people for making him do things, instead of just making his own decisions, and tells him to go do the interview. Deven complains that nobody listens to anything he says, and then despite his best instincts, he leaves and heads straight to Nur's house.

By this point, readers have learned to take Murad's claims with (at least) a grain of salt. His story about running into Nur is obviously a lie—in fact, one of this novel's more understated mysteries is that the reader never actually sees Nur and Murad interact, which contributes to the sense of mystery around whether they are secretly orchestrating the whole interview scheme to defraud Deven. At the same time, in this passage, Murad is totally correct when he criticizes Deven for letting other people push him around and failing to take responsibility for his failures. The irony is only that the person Deven most needs to stand up to is Murad himself.

Deven finds people rushing into Nur's house and supposes that he is giving a poetry recitation. He enters the courtyard and sits among the crowd, which grows and grows until he finds himself pushed toward the front, unable to breathe. The guest of honor sits at the front of the crowd: it's not Nur but his wife, Imtiaz, dressed in her black and silver veil. Two men carry Nur to the front row, where he sits right in front of Deven. Feeling that he owes Nur an apology, Deven mutters that Murad passed on Nur's message. Nur asks if Murad is coming to the event, and Deven realizes that Murad has been deceiving him again.

Deven's plan to catch Nur alone for a private interview is foiled once again; clearly, the party during his last visit wasn't an isolated event. This shows that, even while Deven and Murad thought of Nur as reclusive, he actually lived a remarkably public life as a central figure in his local community. Still, Deven is shocked to see the crowd assemble around Imtiaz rather than Nur. This is because Deven views Nur as the true artist, the only one who really matters, and Imtiaz as nothing more than a support system for him. Of course, this is the same way he thinks about his own marriage to Sarla—after all, Nur's explosive relationship with Imtiaz and Deven's resentment-filled marriage to Sarla are foils for one another throughout the novel. Through these relationships, the novel shows how India's strongly patriarchal gender norms prevent women's labor, needs, and art from being taken seriously.

The crowd cries out for Imtiaz to recite her poems. Her musical accompanists come downstairs, and she teases them for drinking. Attendants bring her a box of betel leaf to chew and a glass of water. Nur whispers to Deven that it's Imtiaz's birthday and this event is intended to honor her. Deven is confused: he still doesn't even really know who Imtiaz is.

Imtiaz is the woman Deven saw with Nur on his first visit—but he doesn't recognize her yet, and the reader may or may not. Regardless, Deven is scandalized that the crowd is celebrating her—a woman—instead of Nur. Worse still, it turns out that she is a poet in her own right. In fact, this event is a mushaira, *a traditional kind of north Indian poetry recitation that traces its roots back to the Persian-influenced royal courts of north India's Muslim rulers (the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire).*

Deven doesn't even pay attention when Imtiaz starts to sing. Instead, he gets annoyed that Nur isn't performing instead, that Imtiaz's voice is so high, and that her verses tell conventional stories about love and God. He assumes that Nur taught her everything she knows, and so her poetry is just a disgraceful parody of his. He can't stand how the audience joyously celebrates such inferior art—it reminds him of how Sarla's family gossips when they come to visit. He can't stop wondering whether Imtiaz is also a prostitute or dancer, how old she is, and who let her perform at Nur's house.

Deven's resentment has little to do with Imtiaz's poetry and everything to do with his own insecurities about gender roles. After all, he doesn't even listen to her before judging her work as inferior and derivative. He seems to feel that, if he appreciates Imtiaz's poetry, he will degrade Nur's—and, worse still, take Imtiaz's side in her marital conflicts. This is just like how, in his own marriage, he prefers to reject Sarla's complaints instead of accepting that they have a legitimate basis. In short, he chooses to feel superior because he is a man rather than resolve the actual problems that arise (which would mean having to change and give up some of the power that he has simply by virtue of being a man).

Suddenly, Imtiaz clears her throat, stops the music, and replaces her harmonium player with another woman, who starts singing alongside her. Imtiaz explains that her throat is troubling her, and she starts to sing in lower tones. Nur stands up in the middle of the performance to declare that he's had enough and wants to lie down. When Deven helps him stand, someone asks if he isn't enjoying the performance. Deven and Ali help Nur stand and walk upstairs to his bed, where he collapses.

By walking out of Imtiaz's performance, Nur makes a public show of his resentment toward her—and, ironically, lets his marital conflicts and disdain for popular art get in the way of his declared mission to revitalize Urdu poetry. At the same time, readers may wonder if Nur's real motivation is jealousy. Regardless, by showing Deven enable Nur's bitterness, the novel further challenges the reader's instinct to identify with him. (After all, he is clearly on the wrong side of this conflict.)

Ali brings Nur a drink, then he returns to the concert, leaving Nur and Deven alone. Nur complains about women's vanity and explains that Imtiaz used to be satisfied hearing *his* poetry but eventually became jealous and started performing her own. He moans that she has stolen his house, jewels, and friends. Already drunk, he insults her in "the most filthy terms he [can] assemble" and calls out for more alcohol.

Deven again has to confront the ugly truth about Nur, who is looking less and less like the sage who will save Urdu and more and more like a bitter, dying old alcoholic who is lost in delusional fantasies. (The only problem is that Deven shares the same fantasies.) After all, Imtiaz is upstaging Nur less because her work is remarkable than simply because he stopped producing new poetry. In fact, Nur's complaints are awfully similar to Deven's: he blames other people for his own lack of imagination and willpower, and he can't stand to watch women succeed when he fails.

Deven changes the subject, asking whether Nur really wanted him to take dictation, but Nur moans about how others have already stolen from him. Deven brings up Nur's postcard, and Nur explains that he sent the card because, one day, he started to remember an old poem he had written and wanted someone to help him write it down. Deven offers to help right now. Nur complains that he's "too broken and crushed" to try remembering his old poems—but perhaps the right kind of friend could help him.

Between Nur's changing the subject and his complaining about feeling "broken and crushed," he seems to want Deven around primarily to stroke his ego. Of course, this suggests that Nur surrounds himself with the partying yes-men Deven met in Chapter Three for precisely the same reason: he feels a desperate need for positive affirmation. In fact, there's a disturbing parallel between Deven and Nur's entitlement and self-pity: they both feel that they deserve better, but the world has left them behind. Nur is clearly using Deven to get the affirmation he craves, but perhaps Deven is seeking exactly the same from Nur.

Before Deven can respond, Imtiaz walks in, disheveled and enraged. She mocks Nur and accuses him of being jealous of her poetic success. Then, she drops a flood of rupee bills on the floor and calls Ali to pick them up. Nur tells Ali not to touch the money, but Imtiaz declares that without it, Nur won't be able to afford alcohol—which has ruined his poetry and his voice. Another woman (Safiya) comes to the door, starts harshly insulting Imtiaz, and tries to attack her by jumping over Nur's bed. Overwhelmed by the drama, Deven runs away.

Imtiaz forces Nur to confront the bitter truth that, at least for the time being, she is the more successful poet. Not only does her work pay the bills, but her performance is also clearly doing more to revitalize the Urdu language than Nur's parties. Her fight with the other woman—Nur's other wife, Safiya—initially makes no sense at all to Deven. So, this visit to Nur's house ends the same way as the first one: Nur's family descends into a chaotic fight, and Deven flees. After all, staying would mean trying to figure out what is happening, intruding on a family's private affairs, and above all, looking squarely at Nur's shortcomings.

Deven goes to Murad's office, where he explains that he has to get home to Sarla. Murad mocks him, but Deven says he refuses to throw his life away to get involved in Nur's family drama. Murad calls Deven a disappointment and suggests that he doesn't really care about Nur's poetry or the interview. But Deven insists that he respects Nur's genius and reveals that Nur is planning on dictating new poems to him. He thinks he may even be able to get Nur's memoirs, too. Impressed, Murad proposes a whole Awaaz edition on Nur's new work; Deven says it could be a book.

Murad continues bullying Deven in exactly the same way as before, with scarcely any interest in what actually happened during Deven's visit to Nur. Clearly, he thinks that the harder he pushes, the more he will get out of Deven. Meanwhile, Deven's promise to get Nur's poetry and memoirs suggests that he's actually right. So, no matter what happens, Murad's solution is the same that it has always been: to ridicule Deven more and push him harder. Needless to say, Murad is enthusiastic about Deven's plan to interview Nur primarily for selfish reasons: he thinks this will boost the status of Awaaz and make him money. (Not even Murad shares the unadulterated love for Urdu poetry that he demands from Deven.)

But Deven worries that he won't have enough time for all the dictation. Murad suggests tape recording, but Deven finds the idea repulsive. Still, Murad insists that print is dead, and the solution is just to get Nur drunk and tape record him, then transcribe the poems later. Deven admits that it's a good idea, but he doesn't have a **tape recorder**. Murad screams that it's not so hard to get one, and he sends Deven out.

Murad continues pushing Deven around, and Deven continues uncritically accepting his ideas. While tape-recording an interview might seem like common sense to 21st-century readers, it's important to remember that this book was written and is set in the early 1980s, when such technology was relatively new—and unreliable—in India.

CHAPTER 6

The college where Deven teaches gets its annual cleaning just before its yearly board meeting. The board members hustle inside and assemble in the conference room while the staff waits outside. After the meeting, everyone drinks tea on the sports field under a marquee. The Principal and his wife meet the board, and the staff, like Deven, anxiously wonder if they'll get a chance to meet the administrators. Deven freezes when realizes that the Principal is standing behind him, but fortunately, the man continues on by.

Deven returns to the ordinary routine of academic life in Mirpore. The yearly meeting shows how dull and unfulfilling Deven's job is, particularly compared to his adventures in Delhi, and underlines how powerless and irrelevant he feels at work. His relationship with the administration is based on his fear of losing his job or funding—the college leadership clearly does not care who he is, why he is passionate about poetry, or what kind of research he is doing.

Instead, Deven runs into Abid Siddiqui, the chair and sole member of the college's Urdu department. Most small colleges wouldn't offer Urdu, but Lala Ram Lal College was partially funded with a donation from the same fleeing Mughal royal who built Mirpore's mosque, and his family ensured that the university would teach Urdu. Since almost nobody studies it, Siddiqui spends much of his time wandering aimlessly around the college. He and Deven joke about the occasion's formality and Urdu's irrelevance. Siddiqui notes that one famous Urdu poet has moved to Beirut and jokes that Urdu is "only grown for export now."

Siddiqui's career is a tongue-in-cheek testament to Urdu's decline: it's clear that, if the college weren't contractually obligated to keep him on the payroll, it would fire him and shutter the whole department in an instant. Like Nur's desperate rant to Deven at the end of the last chapter, the details of Siddiqui's career suggest that Deven's dream of revitalizing Urdu in India is an impossible fantasy, not a realistic goal. Even Siddiqui doesn't dream of doing it. Readers may wonder whether Deven has seriously thought through this idea or whether he just clings to it so that he can feel like he is fulfilling his late father's wishes and has some alternative to his dull everyday life.

But Deven declares that Urdu is still alive in India, too, and he mentions that Murad's Awaaz magazine will soon put out an issue with never-before published poems by Nur. Siddiqui is impressed, and then Deven quietly reveals that he's the one interviewing Nur. He explains that he's already visited Nur's house several times and might even end up writing Nur's biography. Siddiqui scarcely believes Deven and asks if Nur has really been coming to Mirpore. Deven clarifies that *he* has been going to Delhi. "Stranger things have happened," Siddiqui admits, and Deven promises to prove that he's telling the truth.

In a rare moment of confidence and pride, Deven brags to Siddiqui about his research—but carefully fails to mention how poorly it is going, or how he has learned all sorts of unsavory details about Nur's lifestyle. While this conversation gives him a brief taste of the success and social status that he expects to achieve through his research, it also reminds him that Siddiqui is one of the very few people in the whole world who actually care about what he is doing.

Siddiqui suggests that Deven add some fiction into Nur's biography for flair. Offended, Deven explains that he's going to **tape record** Nur's words directly. Noting Siddiqui's curiosity, Deven tells him the whole story of his plans and adventures with Nur, from start to finish. He says he hopes that he can help revitalize Urdu literature, and that eventually every university in India will have a copy of the tapes. Siddiqui jokes that scholars will be able to call up famous poets' voices the way they can songbirds' calls, and Deven quips that they should ask the Principal to invest in recording equipment.

Siddiqui's proposal to embellish Nur's biography strikes Deven as scandalous because it shows that Siddiqui doesn't care about scholarly ethics or truly respect Nur's work. In contrast, Deven presents tape recording as a way to capture the objective truth about Nur's life and work—such technology promises to give the humanities the exactitude of science (and possibly earn them the respect they deserve from people like college administrators). Of course, Deven's prediction speaks volumes about the kinds of knowledge that modernizing, independent India values.

Deven and Siddiqui agree that they should try and approach "Mr. **Jackal**"—by whom they mean the registrar, Mr. Rai. They find him under the marquee, near the Principal, and he informs them that the college's whole budget is being cut. Deven knows nothing about the college administration, except that the sciences get plenty of funding and the humanities get none. So even though the Urdu department has no power, Deven lets Siddiqui do the talking. While Rai and Siddiqui reminisce about Lucknow, where they both went to university, a Hindi lecturer named Jayadev grabs Deven and drags him over to the rest of the department, where they ask what kind of mistress he is going to meet in Delhi on Sundays. After escaping this group, Deven comes face-to-face with Sarla, who scowls and says she wants to go home.

Jackals are scavenger animals who largely feed on trash, carcasses, and whatever else they can find. So, by comparing Mr. Rai to a jackal, Deven and Siddiqui point out that he has a successful career and high status despite doing no original work of his own—instead, he merely manages and benefits from people who actually do the work. Then, the novel ironically juxtaposes Deven and Siddiqui's comments about modern universities' bias toward the sciences with the scene of Siddiqui convincing Rai to give Deven funding—which is clear evidence of how the skills taught in the humanities (like rhetoric and persuasion) have important real-life applications. Meanwhile, Jayadev and the Hindi department's penchant for gossip suggests that they are not serious scholars, which reinforces Deven's perception that north India's true intellectual legacy belongs to Urdu, not Hindi.

The next day, during class, a student passes Deven a note in Urdu, asking him to visit Mr. Rai's office at noon. The note's looping, sweeping calligraphy reminds him of all the unpredictable ups and downs that Nur has created in his life over the last few weeks. At noon, Mr. Rai's office is empty, and the indifferent doorman reports that he is in a meeting. But later that afternoon, Deven finds Rai in his office, and Rai hands him a form giving him permission to spend a small fortune on recording equipment. He's astonished, and he can't wait to delve back into Nur's "world of poetry and art." He recites a line from one of Nur's poems about the spring.

Even Deven is astonished to see his research project actually come together—he is so used to failure that success feels like a rare prize. Curiously, in this passage, the handwritten Urdu note appears personal, meaningful, and passionate to him, while the man who actually funds his research, Mr. Rai, seems cold and impersonal. Put differently, Deven has a more meaningful relationship with the written word than he does with actual living people, which reflects his love for literature and completely unfulfilling social life in Mirpore.

At a Delhi electronics shop, Deven watches Murad closely, convinced that he will try to make a "shady deal" with the shopkeeper, Mr. Jain. After all, Murad told Deven that the university's grant will only cover the worst possible **recorder**—but when they reached the shop, he started asking to see the newest models. Mr. Jain jokes about Murad's rich family, and then Murad admits that he already arranged to buy a secondhand recorder from Jain's nephew.

Deven once again recognizes Murad's inconsistent, "shady" behavior, but he chooses not to stop it. Whether readers find his inaction confusing, pitiful, or frustrating, they are likely to conclude that he has to overcome it if he wants to make any progress in his personal and professional life. Indeed, as Murad himself pointed out, perhaps Deven keeps failing because he refuses to take matters into his own hands, so he lets other people walk all over him. (And perhaps this is exactly why Murad is his friend.)

Deven angrily tries to leave, but before he can, Jain's nephew Chiku comes in with an **old Japanese recorder** in a box. Deven complains that Japanese goods are low-quality, then he turns away while Murad examines the device and promises Deven that it's the right choice. Deven admits that he knows nothing about gadgets, and Mr. Jain explains that Chiku has studied electronics and will help. Murad agrees that Deven could use "a technical assistant" and promises that Chiku will just come when and where he's needed to operate the machine.

Deven reluctantly agrees to Murad and Jain's proposal, even though he knows they're scamming him. It's not yet clear, but this is actually the fateful moment that determines the whole course of Deven's research and ultimately sets up the novel's conclusion. It's significant that the recorder comes from Japan: by the 1980s, India's planned socialist economy had grown little since independence, while capitalist Japan was Asia's most technologically and economically advanced society. This makes it all the more clear that the tape recorder represents modernity—and India's struggle to integrate it with the traditional past that Nur represents.

CHAPTER 7

Hoping to catch Nur alone, Deven plans his visit at an unusual hour. But once again, there's a huge crowd in his courtyard. Deven slips upstairs and enters Nur's room, which is again completely dark. Nur asks if he has heard the news: Imtiaz is very sick, and no doctor can cure her. Nur blames her vigorous birthday celebration, as she collapsed the same night. Deven wonders if the older woman who arrived just before he left (Safiya) ended up beating Imtiaz nearly to death. Secretly, Deven is pleased that Imtiaz is sick, but Nur's helplessness disgusts him. Deven tells Nur that perhaps Imtiaz just has a virus; Nur says that he hopes so. He thinks they should take her to the hospital (where she refuses to go). Deven enthusiastically agrees, less because he wants Imtiaz to recover than because he wants Nur all to himself.

The past keeps repeating itself: Murad sets the terms for Deven's interview, and then Deven arrives at Nur's house, only to find that he has to compete with both Imtiaz and the crowd for Nur's attention. Thus, Deven's cruel, thinly veiled resentment at Imtiaz is understandable: he feels that she is trying to get in his way and that her ultimate goal is to destroy her husband's literary legacy out of petty jealousy. But in turn, this makes him want to destroy her*—or at least get her away from Nur. Clearly, he firmly believes that a great man's art is more important than a woman's life, and he feels little guilt about the minor role he may have played in Imtiaz's illness (if it's true that Safiya's attack provoked it).*

Unable to find a drink for Nur, Deven decides to change the subject and ask Nur to start their interviews. Nur agrees, declaring: "before Time crushes us into dust we must record our struggle against it." He says he wishes his secretary were around, so that he could dictate his old poems from his student days, but Deven explains that he can do the same with his **tape recorder**. Then, remembering that he still knows nothing about tape recorders, Deven starts to feel inadequate.

At last, Deven and Nur appear ready to start serious research—until Deven realizes that he can't do it without the tape recorder, which has put new constraints on the process. Nur's comment about time is another brief flash of poetic insight amidst his otherwise nonsensical lectures. In fact, it offers a profound answer to the novel's central dilemma: Deven's choice between the past and the future. Rather than trying to return to the past and resuscitate Urdu—which is dead in India, for all intents and purposes—perhaps the solution is to figure out how the past can inform the future. After all, this is the purpose of Deven's whole project: to make and disseminate a record of Nur's "struggle against" inevitable change.

Deven explains that they just need to meet alone a few times, so that Nur can tell his life story and recite his poems. But Nur insists that he can do no such thing while Imtiaz is sick—especially because she will overhear everything, and she doesn't like him reciting poetry anymore. Plus, he thinks she's right: he'll "make a fool of [him]self" if he tries to recite more poetry. Deven furiously says that he's wrong, but Nur orders Deven to be quiet. Suddenly, Ali comes inside and explains that Imtiaz wants to see both Deven and Nur. The men look at each other in confusion; Deven thinks the house is full of spies. But Ali helps Nur hobble over to her room anyway, and Deven follows.

The first time Deven visited Nur, Imtiaz complained that Nur wasn't writing any new poetry because he was too busy partying. But now, she manipulates him by insisting that he shouldn't *be writing or performing. In both cases, even as Imtiaz's opinion has shifted, everything seems to elegantly fit together to prevent Deven from getting his work done. While Imtiaz appears to be using her illness to manipulate Nur, readers would also be justified in asking whether Nur might be in on the scheme, too.*

Imtiaz is lying in her bed, looking sickly and wearing a bandage on her forehead, surrounded by followers and attendants. She tells Deven that he shouldn't let Nur make any public appearances, lest he end up like her. Deven protests that this isn't his plan, but Imtiaz says that she knows that "**jackals** from universities […] feed upon [the] carcasses" of poets, and that Deven wants to "tear at [Nur's] living flesh." Nur protests, but Imtiaz reiterates her warning. She asks Deven why he keeps visiting, and Deven says that he wants to pay his respects to Nur and hear his poetry. Imtiaz insists that Nur won't recite anything. Nur agrees, but she still cries and says that she knows he will anyway. He promises not to and holds her hands.

Even if Deven doesn't take Imtiaz's complaints about him seriously, they are perfectly valid: Deven expects to get famous by publicizing Nur's *work—not his own. Arguably, then, Deven is exploiting Nur's work for his own benefit—just like Murad is exploiting Deven. It's significant that Imtiaz calls Deven a* jackal*—which is the same word that Deven and Siddiqui used to describe the university registrar, Mr. Rai, who does nothing besides push papers. Her point is clear: having built an industry around analyzing and promoting poetry, academics like Deven are really preying on poets, stealing the money and status that should rightfully be theirs.*

Deven suddenly feels he must leave. He slowly backs out of Imtiaz's room and runs down the stairs to the front door. He decides that he simply can't record Nur at his home—they need to go somewhere else. But this will be challenging, since Nur can't walk without help. Deven hopes Siddiqui can help find a solution. Before he leaves the courtyard, he hears a voice calling to him. He walks past a little girl in a doorway to another courtyard, where goats are tied up, clothes are drying, and an old woman (Safiya) is starting a cooking fire.

Another pattern keeps repeating itself: rather than saying goodbye to Nur and calmly going home at a socially appropriate time, Deven witnesses Nur's family descend into chaos, suddenly feels that he has *to leave, and abruptly flees without telling anyone. He probably feels this way because Nur's unhappy family life reminds him too much of his own. The only difference is that Nur and Imtiaz actually act on their resentments, whereas he and Sarla silently cling to theirs.*

Deven realizes that this woman (Safiya) is the one who fought Imtiaz during his last visit. He figures that Nur has multiple wives, and she must be the eldest of them. She claims that Imtiaz is making up her illness in order to get Nur to stop spending time with Deven. Nur's followers all hate Imtiaz, the old woman explains, and Imtiaz especially hates that Deven cares about Nur's poetry as a form of art, and not just a source of entertainment. Imtiaz doesn't want Nur to achieve fame or glory, she explains before putting a pot of dal on the fire and asking Deven to sit.

As the finer details of Nur's polygamous family life come into view, he starts to look even more callous and cruel than before. (Polygamy is historically uncommon but not unheard of in India; it is mostly practiced among wealthy Muslims and particularly associated with the old royalty.) After becoming famous, Nur seems to have all but abandoned Safiya, his first wife, and redirected his attention toward Imtiaz.

The old woman (Safiya) tells Deven to ignore Imtiaz, interview Nur, and write his book. She says that Nur is a great man and asks if Deven thinks so too. He declares that Nur is India's greatest living Urdu poet, and he asks if the woman knows how he can get Nur alone to conduct his interviews. The woman agrees that Deven has to get Nur out of the house, because Imtiaz will never leave (or let *Nur* leave). The woman says she can sneak Nur out the back door, and Deven can rent a room somewhere in the same lane to do the interviews. She offers to arrange the room, too. Deven agrees and promises to send a message with a date and time for the interview.

Safiya confirms Deven's suspicion that Imtiaz is trying to prevent him from interviewing Nur. Deven couldn't stand Imtiaz's explanation for her behavior—that scholars like him unjustly prey on the writers they study. But Safiya's explanation—that Imtiaz is jealous—appeals to Deven because she paints him as Nur's savior. Of course, she also offers him an easy solution to the question of where and how to record Nur. Still, critical readers might wonder to what extent Safiya is playing on Deven's misogyny to manipulate him—and to what extent the novel is trying to show how it backfires when men try to circumvent and overpower women instead of taking them seriously.

Deven gets up to leave, but before he can, the woman (Safiya) tells him not to forget to pay Nur for his time. Poets' families have to eat too, she says, and Deven should name his price in the message he sends. As he walks away, Deven wonders why Nur married such different women, and he concludes that he'll have to give up on his project.

When Safiya asks for money, this suggests that she might also have ulterior motives for working with Deven—just like Murad, Jain, and possibly even Nur himself. But Deven has already spent all his funding from the college on the tape recorder—there is no way he can afford to pay Safiya, too. Thus, now for the third time, Deven walks away from Nur's house convinced that his research is over. But the cycle will continue; he will be back sooner than he knows.

CHAPTER 8

Deven stops going to Delhi, and Sarla starts mocking him, asking if his mistress threw him out. When he insists that it was just work, she goes to the kitchen and yells out the window at Manu or the neighbor, since she can't yell at him. He realizes he should have pretended he *was* having an affair—but, like all his good ideas, this comes far too late. He takes solace in cigarettes—and then starts to chastise himself for choosing solace over drive, ambition, and art. He feels like a failure: nobody will publish his poems or his book on Nur, not even Murad, and nobody respects him. He's spineless and empty, he thinks, just like his father. He even failed to interview Nur.

Consumed by shame and feelings of failure, Deven retreats into himself. Clearly, this is a recurring pattern in his life: he fails to act because he is afraid to get out of his comfort zone. This is why he doesn't say no to Murad, stick around at Nur's house, or reconcile with Sarla. Meanwhile, Sarla's feelings about Deven's trips to Delhi show how wide the gulf between them really is: she either doesn't understand his obsession with Nur or doesn't believe that he's important enough to actually interview the man. Notably, the fact that she can't directly express her anger with him shows how deeply traditional Indian gender roles limit women's power over their lives.

Sarla watches Deven hunched over in self-loathing and thinks that, unlike men, women don't have the time to "play at being dead while still alive." Deven recalls reciting Nur's poetry back to him; he felt like a parent speaking to a child. Then, Sarla brings him a postcard from Nur, who writes that Imtiaz inspired him to compose a new poem cycle about women's suffering.

Sarla's poignant comment highlights the way that India's strict gender roles often deny women the freedom and luxury of an intellectual life. Women are in charge of sustaining the rest of the family—or keeping all the men, elders, and children fed, clothed, and rested. So, they cannot easily pause to think: others are constantly making demands on them. (In Nur's household, Imtiaz has the opportunity to write poetry only because Safiya is busy taking care of the cooking and cleaning.) Nur's postcard, which announces that he can empathize with women, only underlines Deven's inability to do the same.

It's early summer, and Deven struggles to sleep in the heat. He gets up and goes to the courtyard, where he watches the stars, smokes, and thinks about how he feels trapped in his marriage, family, and job. He thought Nur would help him escape, but it turns out that Nur is just as trapped. A train whistles by, but this only gives Deven false hope of freedom. He tries to sleep again, but then he hears Mrs. Bhalla and her friends walking to the temple, singing: "O will you come along with us / Or stay back in the pa-ast?"

Mrs. Bhalla's song underlines Deven's feeling of stagnation. In fact, it seems to be addressed directly at his dilemma: he has to choose between the past and the future—not only between the life he has lived so far and the better future he dreams about, but also between Urdu poetry and Hindu literature, and between his commitment to his work and his commitment to his family.

One day, Deven decides to go visit Siddiqui at his large but dilapidated villa in the bazaar, where he lives alone. Like a stray dog, Deven squeezes through a hole in the broken gate and hobbles up to the porch. There are no lights or curtains, most of the doors look boarded up, and the kitchen roof has caved in. Siddiqui just orders food from the bazaar. He sends his servant boy Chotu for rum and dinner, and then he explains that Chotu is a talented singer and will perform for them. Over dinner, they discuss literature, history, and politics in Urdu.

Siddiqui's collapsing old house is significant for at least three reasons. First, it symbolizes Urdu's decline—Siddiqui owns it because he's a minor descendant of a minor Muslim royal, and much like that old royal order, it is literally falling apart. Second, given the first portion of this chapter's focus on Sarla's perspective and the mostly invisible work that she puts into maintaining her and Deven's house, Siddiqui's collapsing villa represents the degraded lives that men would live in the absence of women's labor. And finally, it is a foil for Nur's house, which is also old, grand, falling apart, and located in a bazaar.

Deven brings up Urdu poetry, hoping to discuss Nur, but instead, Siddiqui starts talking about how Chotu will sing for them. Then, Siddiqui's friends show up and start playing cards. Deven is horrified that the evening is starting to resemble Nur's parties. Siddiqui starts recklessly losing money to Chotu at poker, and Deven quits the game.

Siddiqui's hedonism and nonchalance about serious topics also make him resemble Nur in Deven's eyes: he seems to care more about enjoying himself than about Urdu's death or India's future. This raises the distressing possibility that Nur isn't the exception: perhaps most *writers and poets don't really care about the ideas they write about and the causes they claim to champion.*

A few hours later, his head spinning from the rum, Deven decides to go home. On his way out, he mentions Nur, and Siddiqui asks him for the tape. Deven mumbles that he doesn't have a tape because Nur's wife asked him for money, and he doesn't have any. Siddiqui coldly says that the college paid for the **tape recorder**, so it owns the tape, and Deven has to figure out how to make it. Deven collapses; bawling on the ground, he asks what he can possibly do. Siddiqui proposes asking the college for money and offers to do it, because Deven is "incapable." He tells Deven to leave and runs back to his house.

After reminding Deven of Nur for most of the evening, Siddiqui suddenly starts to resemble Murad: he grows cold, looks down on Deven, and seems to enjoy pointing out his shortcomings and making him suffer. At the same time, Siddiqui has a point when he says that it's Deven's job to figure out how to make the recording, and at the end of the conversation, he ultimately does step in to help Deven. Thus, it's difficult to tell whether Siddiqui is really malicious, or Deven just has unrealistic expectations of him.

Later, Deven wonders why he let Siddiqui take power over his interview. In fact, he also constantly lets Murad control him. He wretches from sickness, but when Sarla brings him an herbal infusion from the bazaar, he realizes that he was just panicking. He wonders how other people find the discipline to organize their lives and the courage to accomplish great things. Just then, a telegram arrives from Murad, who blames Deven for delaying the next issue of Awaaz and demands to know when he will start recording Nur.

Deven continues to blame others' strength for his own weakness. Siddiqui didn't just take over from him, like Murad does. Instead, Deven insisted on giving Siddiqui his power, because he didn't believe he could competently wield it. But even though Deven appeals to be falling closer and closer to rock bottom, at least he's finally admitting that his fundamental problem isn't just his boring life and powerlessness, but rather his lack of discipline, willpower, and responsibility. In other words, he's starting to achieve some moral clarity about what he needs to change in order to succeed.

Siddiqui approaches Deven at the college canteen and calls him a lucky man. Deven assumes Siddiqui is mocking him, but actually, Siddiqui has convinced the registrar (Mr. Rai) to dedicate more funds to their project. Deven is astonished: he doesn't even think he deserves people's help, and he wonders if Siddiqui, Nur, and Murad are actually setting up a trap for him. Siddiqui explains that the library has agreed to fund the project as a way to build expertise in new audio-visual education methods.

Things start to go right for Deven, but this doesn't mean that all is well. As he pointed out in the last scene, the real problem is that he has no control over his own life—even positive developments, like this one, are merely things that happen to him. His suspicion that others may be trapping him is actually wiser than he realizes—while readers will never entirely learn if it's correct, it does foreshadow the end of the novel in a meaningful way. And the library's explanation for releasing the funds shows that the college cares more about new technology than about Deven's research.

Deven still has to deal with two naysayers: Trivedi, the vile head of the Hindi department, and Sarla. The pious Trivedi scowls and acts outraged when Deven requests a week's vacation to research Urdu, but he ends up giving it to him (while threatening to fire him and throwing an inkpot at him). When Deven tells Sarla that he'll be spending the vacation working in Delhi, instead of at her family's home, she expresses her outrage more quietly, letting a bowl of yogurt spill on the table and asking how she could possibly explain it to her parents. Deven says it doesn't matter: since her parents are illiterate, they can't possibly understand his research anyway.

Finally emboldened, Deven stands up for himself and his research, even though it means spending the summer away from his family. Trivedi's reaction to him shows how deeply engrained the politics of Hindi and Urdu are in India. The languages are a proxy for the constant communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims, and many members of the Hindu majority (like Trivedi) view Urdu as treasonous and anti-Indian (even though it's still an official language in many parts of the country). Meanwhile, Sarla continues to express her outrage with Deven's behavior in indirect ways, because traditional patriarchal norms don't allow her to directly confront him.

CHAPTER 9

The next weeks of Deven's life rush by in a whirlwind. Murad congratulates Deven on finally arranging the interview; they are waiting for Nur at the house that his older wife (Safiya) has rented them. Deven passed her an envelope full of cash through the back door, and she sent him to a pink house on the same street. At the house, Deven worked up the courage to tell a burly bodyguard (Bulu) that he's the one interviewing Nur, and then its gaudily dressed owner invited him upstairs. Chiku followed with all his recording equipment, gawking at the dimly lit bedrooms they passed on their way upstairs and asking if this house is a hotel. Deven reminded him that they only have three days to get all their material.

The novel returns to its stop-and-go cycle of calm and crisis, stagnation and progress. And Deven returns to a state of wild, unrealistic optimism: he desperately wants to believe that his interview will go smoothly now that he has finally bought the tape recorder and paid Safiya for the room. Remarkably, he thinks that, even after all his starts and stops with Nur, he can finish the whole project in three days. But, as the novel has consistently shown thus far, things are never so simple for him—there is always someone else ready to give him a new challenge or saddle him with unexpected expenses.

But when Murad asks how long Deven needs, Deven says he doesn't know. Murad complains that he wasn't expecting to come to this part of the city, and Deven points out that it's where Nur lives. Murad repeats his question, but Deven refuses to give a timetable because "a poet [can't] be pinned down by time." Murad asks if Deven is drunk, but Deven is just thrilled to finally be interviewing Nur.

Murad's complaints about Nur's neighborhood suggest that he hasn't been there before—which, in turn, suggests that he doesn't care nearly as much about Nur's work as he claims to. (Indeed, readers might wonder whether he has been pretending to care about Nur all along, just because he knows that Deven idolizes him.) Meanwhile, Deven's refusal to name a timeline suggests that he has finally learned how to deal with Murad—by turning his own tactics against him and refusing to give him a straight answer. And his claim that "a poet [can't] be pinned down by time" is an ironic double-entendre: he also appears to be arguing that the beauty of true poetry is timeless—even though he is interviewing Nur precisely because Urdu poetry seems to be a dying art.

When he arrives, Nur immediately starts talking about food and drink. He requests the biryani he always orders from a specific chef in the mosque, and he insists that the only way to have it is with rum. He has brought his followers, who enthusiastically agree on the need for rum and biryani—and that Deven must be the one to pay. Deven calls Murad from a pharmacy to ask for money, but Murad's only response is a few meaningless grunts. Fortunately, he stops by the next morning with cash—but he promises to cut the same amount from Deven's pay.

Deven's high expectations prove unrealistic: Nur is still the same man, more interested in food, drink, and revelry than poetry. And his dreadful followers come, too, despite Deven's efforts to get rid of them. Indeed, between the tape recorder, the rent payment to Safiya, and the biryani and rum for Nur, this interview process seems to have benefited everyone but Deven. (Murad's history of nonpayment and threat to dock his fee suggests that he may not even get fair compensation for his work.)

Once he gets his food and drink, Nur finally starts reciting his poetry. But every time Chiku has to fiddle with the microphones and cables to get the **recorder** working, Nur goes on grumpily about the evils of technology. Often, Chiku completely misses Nur's poems and only starts recording once Nur is already telling old stories about pigeon racing or the time a neighbor attempted to rob him, but at least he sprinkles in a line of poetry once in awhile. Deven's other main job is making sure everyone has their drinks. Later, Deven and the crowd argue over whether to give the sleeping Chiku a drink. In fact, the crowd constantly distracts Nur from his poetry and life story, making it all but impossible to record the right moments.

Chiku's incompetence further complicates the interview and makes Deven start to regret not just choosing the simple route and taking dictation. The recorder also alienates Nur, whose grumpy rant about technology highlights the struggle between tradition and modernity at the heart of the novel. As Nur puts it, traditional methods are tried and true, while modern ones are often more about hype than function. Indeed, Deven's attempt to use the modern (the recorder) to preserve the traditional (Nur's poetry and memories) fails spectacularly. Perhaps this is simply a warning against blind faith in technology, or perhaps it means that past traditions (like Urdu poetry) are incompatible with modernity.

Eventually, Deven directly asks Nur to recite poetry. Offended, Nur objects to being "ground between stones, and bled, in order to produce poetry—for *you*." But at other times, especially in the morning, Nur freely shares his poetry. He also explains his artistic influences, who (to Deven's surprise) are mainly the English poets Byron and Shelley. Once, he even recites John Keats's poem "La Belle Dame" three times in a row. Chiku records all three—but misses Nur's original poem.

Nur's offended response to Deven suggests that, even after all the effort Deven has put into interviewing him, he might simply refuse to give Deven any usable material. It's not clear if he enjoys stringing Deven along, or if he still views Deven as a secretary who works for him, *and so is only willing to share his poetry on* his *terms. Regardless, his complaint is similar to Imtiaz's claim that scholars only study poets in order to "feed upon [their] carcasses"—or profit from their hard work. In short, Nur and Imtiaz both challenge the notion that interpreting a work of literature is a service to the author and the reading public. Rather, they present it as a selfish way for the critic to use (or even distort) a work for their own ends.*

One day, Deven hears women arguing violently below, and then something heavy falling down the stairs. One of Nur's followers, a cheeky young man with filthy feet, explains that "someone has overstayed." That night, this man asks Deven if Nur has come to this brothel for the recordings—or to look for another wife. He explains that Nur met Imtiaz here, then he walks away laughing. Deven wants to attack him.

The novel never reveals exactly what is happening downstairs—only that it's something sinister which Deven doesn't fully understand. Still, Nur's follower confirms Deven's worst suspicions about where they are, the story of Nur and Imtiaz's marriage, and Nur's character in general. (While married to Safiya, Nur started spending time at this brothel—where he met Imtiaz, who was a sex worker, and decided to take her as his second wife.)

The brothel opens directly onto the bazaar, so traffic constantly interrupts the recordings. Occasionally, it's so loud that Nur has to stop talking. Once, a truck driver starts arguing with a crowd on the street. As Deven tries to continue the interview, Nur's followers run to the balcony and Nur starts ordering kebabs. Deven tells Chiku to stop recording, and as soon as he does, Nur starts reciting one of his famous poems.

The recording session devolves into a carnivalesque farce. As Deven runs into more and more obstacles, his chances of actually recording Nur's unpublished poetry start to seem slimmer and slimmer. The novel doesn't just pile on these twists and turns for comic effect—it also does so in order to emphasize Deven's powerlessness and inability to take charge of his circumstances.

That evening, Chiku declares that he has to quit to go to his sister's wedding; he demands his pay. Unaware that he was supposed to pay Chiku, Deven says he won't do it unless Chiku sticks around to finish the recordings. Deven phones Murad, who points out that they have been working for three weeks, when Chiku only promised one. Murad demands that Deven finish the interviews and start writing his article immediately. But Deven thinks Nur is finally digging into the past, and he only needs a week or two more.

Even though Chiku is a terrible, lazy worker, his complaints about his working conditions seem reasonable. But they still create another minor crisis for Deven, whose job is looking more and more like herding cats. After all, he was under the impression that he paid for Chiku's help when he paid Jain for the recorder. But now, it seems that Jain gave him Chiku in order to squeeze even more money out of him—money that he simply doesn't have.

Deven buys a notebook so that he can transcribe Nur's poems normally, and then he goes back to his old school friend Raj's flat, where he is staying. When he first arrived in Delhi, Deven visited to ask if Raj had returned from Cairo, where he had been teaching. Instead, Raj's widowed aunt greeted Deven and invited him in for dinner. He ate along with another man, who welcomed Deven to sleep on the veranda. He has been doing that ever since. He has learned that the man is a tailor who works downstairs.

Deven's stay with Raj's family offers the reader a brief, peaceful interlude to his frustrations with Nur. Raj's departure to Cairo echoes Deven's fantasies of running away from his life and starting over, far away. And Raj's aunt's hospitality creates a worrisome parallel between Deven and Nur: just as Nur and his lackeys are using a space that Deven rented, Deven is living rent-free with Raj's aunt, who is generous out of a pious obligation to the destitute, rather than genuine goodwill. This raises the possibility that Deven may be just as selfish and manipulative as the very people he criticizes—he just doesn't realize it.

Meanwhile, the pious widow never speaks, but she generously feeds anyone who needs food. She also does several elaborate *pujas* (prayers) every evening while the tailor sings religious songs for her. At night, the tailor tells Deven boring stories about his clients, like the woman who demanded thirty blouses in less than a week. Deven wonders if he is overstaying his welcome and tries to help the widow with her expenses by buying her a basket of fruit, but she just uses it in prayers and gives it to monks. At night, Deven gazes at a park across the street, where he used to play cricket with Raj when they were children.

Although she only appears in this passage, Raj's aunt is a symbolically powerful figure in the novel. She is a stand-in for Deven's mother, who was also widowed after his father's death. And her purity operates as a kind of moral mirror for Deven, who sees himself as ethically superior to the swindlers and liars who surround him—but often fails to see how he manipulates others, when necessary, too. Her behavior highlights how, throughout this novel (as in Indian society generally), men's freedom and success depend on women's sacrifice and generosity. (After all, she is attempting to fulfill the strict religious requirements on Hindu widows, whom society often marginalizes.

Deven brings his notebook when he goes to meet Nur the next day. But Nur complains that he hasn't slept and doesn't want to recite poetry. His followers start performing terrible poems, and Chiku asks if he should record them. Then, Nur interrupts to tell Deven that "sifting and selecting from the debris of our lives" is impossible. Suddenly, he starts reading a totally new poem. Deven starts transcribing, but then Nur grabs the book and writes it down himself. But Nur quickly gets tired, gives up, and asks for a drink. Someone calls for "women and dance," but Nur refuses, saying he's too old. In fact, he says he's totally done, and he hobbles out of the room. Deven runs after him, but Nur says the interviews are over and he's going for some "primordial sleep."

With one final burst of poetic insight, Nur gives Deven the only valuable material from his whole research process: one unpublished poem. Of course, it's deeply ironic that, after struggling for weeks with his innovative but useless recorder, he gets this poem on paper, not tape. Indeed, Nur's quote about "the debris of our lives" is a warning against the whole endeavor of tape recording, and the kind of attitude toward time and history that it represents. Namely, he suggests that trying to accurately record the past or reduce it to a single meaning is a fool's errand—both impossible and pointless. Instead of trying to recover Nur's past, perhaps people like Deven should try to apply his wisdom to the future. Lastly, Nur's call for "primordial sleep" is a reference to death, and it suggests that this is the last time that Deven and the reader will see him.

CHAPTER 10

The following morning, Deven and Chiku come back to the brothel to continue recording, but nobody is there. Deven realizes that Nur is not coming back, and Chiku angrily yells that he is missing his sister's wedding preparations for nothing. The women who let Deven in the first day (the brothel owner) approaches him and asks why he has come—Safiya has already cancelled their room rental. Bulu, the burly bouncer, comes up to kick them out, and they dutifully go down to the street. The brothel owner tells Deven that the police will come after Safiya if she does not pay the bill, and she shuts the door.

Deven's research ends abruptly, without any real notice for Nur, which only heightens his suspicion that the whole thing was all a scam. After all, Nur and his friends got to party, Safiya got her envelope of cash, and the brothel owner will get paid for renting out her room. It isn't clear if they were working together, or if they were just pulling individual tricks that all happened to harmonize. In fact, it's even possible that they all had honest intentions the whole time: perhaps Nur really did want to share his poetry, and Safiya and the brothel owner really did want to help him. But regardless, Deven will have to bear the cost, as he took responsibility for the research—even though it wasn't his idea, and even though he didn't fully realize it until it was already too late.

Deven asks Murad to listen to the **tapes** with him in Jain's shop, as he must return to Mirpore to grade exam papers as soon as possible. Murad and Jain both protest but ultimately agree. Chiku sets up the machine, then he leaves. Jain can't get the tapes to play and calls over a boy who looks covered in motor oil (Pintu) to help. The boy gets the machine to work, but the tapes are a disaster. There are occasional crackling sounds, car horns, and laughs, but Nur's voice is mostly absent. His rum and lunch orders are loud and clear, but his poems are barely audible.

The tapes were Deven's last hope, and in a disappointing but completely unsurprising plot twist, they turn out to be completely useless. Deven's research project is officially a failure. Of course, the recorder's failure is important symbolically, as well as for the novel's plot: modern technology has failed to live up to its promise of preserving memories of the past and saving Urdu from fading into oblivion. Indeed, the only new Nur poem Deven has actually discovered is the one that Nur wrote down in his notebook.

Murad complains that the **tapes** are useless and that Deven is to blame for not checking them during the interview process. Deven realizes that, for once, Murad is right. Deven promises that he can at least write an article for Awaaz, but he has no idea how he can deliver the tapes he promised to his college. Murad blames Jain and Chiku for the poor recordings, but Jain says that it's Deven's fault for failing to rent a proper recording studio. Murad agrees with Jain; he jovially puts his arm around Deven's shoulder and says that "the tapes are hopeless" and that he's going to lose his job. Deven realizes that his friendship with Murad is based on "nothing but familiarity, custom."

Deven starts to confront the consequences of his research's failure—and, at a deeper level, his weakness of will. He is exasperated to realize that, since Murad has transferred all the risk onto him, he will probably get fired for wasting the college's resources, while Murad will lose nothing. Worse still, even in Deven's time of need, Murad refuses to take his side. Instead, as always, he unreliably shifts back and forth, so that he doesn't have to commit to anything or anyone. Fortunately, Deven finally realizes that his friendship with Murad is useless: they are still repeating the dynamic they set up as children, in which Murad exploits Deven and Deven lets him. If nothing else, Deven is approaching a breaking point at which he will have to confront the toxic patterns that are slowly destroying his life.

Deven starts screaming at Jain, who promises that he can salvage the **tapes** through editing. Deven complains that nobody in Mirpore can help him edit the tapes, but Jain offers to send grease-covered Pintu, who is also one of his nephews. Deven reluctantly agrees. He and Pintu take the bus to Mirpore with all their recording equipment; Pintu stares out the window, almost in disbelief, while Deven closes his eyes and says nothing.

Deven accepts Jain's offer out of desperation, fully aware that Pintu might turn out to be just as useless as Chiku and only create more problems. Indeed, Pintu has no personality or redeeming qualities at all. In fact, his presence on the bus ride only reminds Deven that Jain is taking advantage of him, and that he has completely lost control of his research project.

Deven's house is empty and full of dust when they arrive, as Sarla has spent the summer with her family. She forgot to throw out the trash, which is rotting. Struggling to contain his rage, Deven points Pintu to Manu's bed, then he goes and takes a bath. The following day, Deven receives a letter from Nur, who writes that his eyes are worsening, he needs cataract surgery, and he has no money to pay for it. He asks if Deven can get funding from his college, as this is his only chance at continuing to write poetry.

The rotting trash is an obvious metaphor for Deven's unhappy marriage, and it reminds him that absolutely nothing in his life is going well. Nur's letter—the first of many—is an obvious ploy to get more of Deven's money. After all, Nur hasn't been writing much poetry, and he hasn't shared the little he has written, so not even Deven is foolish enough to think that a little more money will change things.

At the college, which is also completely empty, Deven gets to work correcting exam papers and editing the tapes with Pintu and Siddiqui. Unsurprisingly, Pintu doesn't actually know how to use the recording device, and Siddiqui doesn't care about the project at all. Deven accepts that he'll have to figure out the tapes on his own if he wants to keep his job. But then, he gets a surprise visit from one of his students, tech-savvy Dhanu, who has been hanging around the college and studying radio technology in his free time. Dhanu proposes re-recording the useful parts of the tapes on his own **tape recorder** to make a "master" tape. Dhanu's friends start coming to the college to help, and Pintu and Siddiqui disappear.

Pintu does turn out to be incompetent and unhelpful, after all, but at least Dhanu comes to the rescue. Still, this may be too little, too late. Deven is painfully aware that he is just trying to pick up the pieces of a hopeless situation, and he's quite embarrassed to be completely dependent on a student to finish his research. Put differently, even in his most desperate moment, Deven can't solve his problems on his own; even after he has nearly destroyed his career by trusting other people to do everything for him, he continues to outsource everything to them.

Deeply grateful for Dhanu's help, Deven withdraws his last savings to buy him a blank cassette. Dhanu and his friends salvage what they can of the tapes, but the finished product is a "bizarre pastiche" of short clips. When they finish, Deven invites Siddiqui to come listen to it. He tells Dhanu that the tape is "charming," but he quietly asks Deven, "is that *all*?" He's visibly disappointed, but Deven promises that he's writing a book, too. Siddiqui says it doesn't matter: the college gave them funding to produce a *tape*. He asks what will happen if the board members ask to listen to it at their upcoming meeting.

Naturally, Deven's last-ditch effort to save his recordings ends up costing his last few rupees. Thus, Nur officially bankrupts him. Siddiqui's brutally honest reaction to the tapes is discouraging, but at least it can realistically prepare Deven to face the administration. Namely, Deven will need to admit and take responsibility for his failure—something he has struggled to do throughout the book. He has long viewed himself as a failure, and he has often blamed *himself for his mistakes, but he has never truly taken* responsibility *for them.*

Pintu approaches Deven to demand his pay, and Deven gives him some loose change. Then, Dhanu and his friends demand that Deven give them the highest grades in their class. Deven asks where they learned to fix radios and points out that their attendance is poor, but they complain that Hindi is useless and won't help them get jobs. They run off.

In a twist that should surprise nobody, the boys were helping Deven out of selfishness, not altruism. Their complaint about Hindi underlines why Deven feels so useless and undervalued at work: in post-independence India, nobody seriously cares about literature or the humanities. At best, they view Hindi classes as a tiresome, outdated requirement.

At home, Deven receives another letter from Nur, blaming him for "hastening [his] early death" and demanding a free education at the college for his son. Deven spends all night grading papers, then lies in bed, motionless, hoping for his life to be as dull and uneventful as it was before he met Nur.

Now fully aware that Nur is taking advantage of him, just like Murad has been throughout the book, Deven simply ignores Nur's letter and accepts that they will never be true friends or intellectual partners. But his anxiety-filled night shows that he needs to do more than just say no to the people who are exploiting him: he also needs to learn to stand up for himself and demand what he deserves.

The next morning, Deven brings his sheet of final marks to a meeting in the college staff room, at which the administration talks on and on about academic standards and poor attendance. Deven hands in his grades and, seeking to avoid his students, agrees to have tea with his dreadful colleague Jayadev. He admits to Jayadev that he spent the whole summer break working—and that he's more likely to get fired for it than promoted. Jayadev shows him a postcard from an old colleague who has gone to teach biochemistry in America—and get rich. Jayadev says he wants to do the same, but Deven yells that nobody needs Hindi teachers in America. Jayadev admits that they should have become scientists, and they both agree that the humanities have no future.

Deven claims to hate Jayadev's shallowness and naivety, but their conversation suggests that Deven's real issue is that Jayadev reminds him of himself—and especially his insignificant, hopeless career (which, to make matters worse, he is about to lose). Indeed, their names make it clear that they are character foils for each other: they share the same root, "dev," which means "deity." Like Raj's job in Cairo, their colleague's job in the U.S. represents the greener grass on the other side of life, which they will never be able to reach. And their lament about the state of Hindi and the humanities echoes Nur's complaint that India is trading its rich, unique traditions for shiny, mass-produced technology. Of course, everything they say about Hindi is doubly true for Urdu.

Deven passes his glaring students on his way out of the canteen. At home, he finds two more letters. One is from Sarla, so he doesn't open it. The other is from Nur, who has also sent a 500-rupee bill for the room in the brothel. Deven decides to go to Delhi one last time before Sarla returns and the school year begins. It's the scorching part of late summer just before the monsoon. From the bus window, the countryside looks totally devoid of life. In Delhi, Deven takes a rickshaw straight to Murad's office.

Deven's students are glaring at him because he didn't inflate their grades like they asked him to do. This shows that Deven is finally standing up to someone*—and he seems to have worked up the courage to go confront Murad in Delhi, too. The ridiculous brothel bill might feel like the last straw. But, of course, it isn't—because in this novel, there's always more extortion and manipulation to come.*

Murad immediately starts complaining that Deven's article held up his journal. Deven shows him the 500-rupee bill, and Murad yells that he won't spend any more on Deven or Nur. Deven points out that interviewing Nur was Murad's idea, but Murad explains that he already spent a small fortune on rum and food for Nur, and his mother won't send him any more money for such expenses. Deven says that all he wants is his payment for the article, and Murad rages that the article isn't worth 500 rupees. After all, Deven did it for passion, not pay. But Sahay, the elderly printer, insists that Murad ought to pay Deven. Murad finally agrees to pay Deven, but not until the magazine publishes the article.

As usual, Murad goes on the offensive so that he doesn't have to admit to his mistakes, and as usual, Deven takes the bait by engaging him in argument rather than dismissing him through action. Ultimately, it will never be clear whether—and to what extent—Murad was in on the scam all along—perhaps he got to keep a cut of the recording and rent payments from Deven's college, or perhaps he lost money to Nur and Nur's family, too. But between Sahay's disapproval and his funding from his mother, Murad is finally backed into a corner, and he has no choice but to start making concessions.

Distraught, Deven puts his head on the table and almost faints. People crowd around, concerned for his health, and someone brings him water. He drinks it, stands up, and walks out with a newfound sense of calm. Murad runs after him and makes another offer: he will pay off Deven's debts in exchange for the rights to his **tape** of Nur. Deven pushes Murad up against the wall and reminds him that the college owns the tape, and Murad tells Deven that he should get the college to pay his debts instead.

Deven's drink of water marks an important turning point in his character development: he finally breaks his cycle of passivity by taking matters into his own hands, standing up for himself and rejecting Murad's proposal. It may be too late to save his research, but he can still save himself from manipulators like Murad by refusing to give them power over him.

Deven walks out into the ungodly Delhi heat and starts wandering around aimlessly. He passes Chandni Chowk and thinks about visiting Nur, but he continues on instead, past the city's famous Red Fort and toward Darya Ganj, where he grew up. He considers visiting Raj's widowed aunt but decides against it and goes to sit in a park bench instead. He watches Delhi's huge central mosque, the Jama Masjid, as the afternoon sun gradually sets. He remembers his conversation with Jayadev about the humanities and sciences, and he realizes that, if poetry offered simple answers like math and science do, then it would lose its perfection and become worthless.

Deven wanders around a number of significant places in Old Delhi, which was the seat of power for centuries under India's Muslim rulers and the center of its Urdu literary culture. This setting makes it clear that he is grappling not only with his own identity and future, but also with India's. Specifically, he is wondering what will happen to India's linguistic and cultural heritage as India grows into an independent democracy with a modern economy. It's already clear that Indians see math, science, and English as the way of the future—and art, literature, and above all Urdu as relics from the past. Yet Deven realizes that the humanities must survive precisely because the sciences can never take their place. In other words, literature will always stay relevant precisely because it speaks to the complexity of the human experience and can't be reduced to single answers, like science can.

CHAPTER 11

Deven returns home the next day to find Sarla sweeping the dusty floor. She asks if he is still going to Delhi, and he asks why she didn't tell him she was coming back. Pointing to her unopened letter on the table, she says that she did. He realizes that they both feel miserable and humiliated; he considers embracing her, but he knows that he will lose his power in the marriage if he shows vulnerability. She explains that Manu is showing the neighbors the new clothes that her parents bought him, and Deven realizes that he might never be able to buy Manu anything ever again.

Deven and Sarla return to the stale, unsatisfying, but familiar rhythms of their everyday life. As usual, they choose stalemate over compromise. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that Deven makes this choice, because he prefers having the upper hand to having a happy marriage, and Sarla has no option but to accept it. Instead, she continues to quietly remind him that he ought to treat his family better: by pointing out that he didn't open her letter, she emphasizes that he doesn't view her as an equal, and by pointing out that her parents bought Manu clothes, she reminds him that he doesn't provide enough for the family materially.

Deven sits in his broken chair, and Sarla asks if he wants tea. She's happy to be back home, in her comfort zone, where she actually has some power. Annoyed that Deven isn't doing anything, she complains that he never got the sweeper to clean the house, but he's too tired to respond. He decides to read his unopened letters instead.

It's telling that Deven doesn't even fix his chair (which represents the shortcomings and dissatisfaction that define his life in Mirpore). It's also significant that Sarla immediately offers Deven tea—as a Hindu housewife is supposed to—and says that Deven should have hired the sweeper (rather than just cleaning the house himself). This underlines how strict traditional gender roles are in India: even in the direst, most unstable circumstances, it's unthinkable that a woman like Sarla would stop taking care of the house—or that a man like Deven would start do so.

The first letter is a long series of sheets in elegant Urdu, but it's not from Nur. It's from Imtiaz, who writes that she knew about the recording the whole time, and Deven "insulted [her] intelligence by [his] deception." She explains that Nur fell in love with her because of her poetry, not her dancing, and while her poems may not be as good as Nur's, she also never received any formal education. Unlike Safiya and Nur's friends, she was a true "intellectual companion" to him. She attaches her poems, which she predicts Deven will be too cowardly to read. She claims that he doesn't take her work seriously because her intelligence threatens his sense of superiority over women. And her prediction is right: Deven cannot bring himself to read her poems—to recognize her intelligence and humanity.

In her final appearance, Imtiaz speaks her part and solidifies her role as the novel's conscience: she directly calls out Deven's sexism and the way it colors his ideas about Nur, his work, and literature in general. Deven should not be ashamed that his idol, Nur, married a dancer who wrote poetry, rather than a disempowered "traditional" Indian bride like Safiya or Sarla. (Notably, Imtiaz's knowledge about Deven's interviews strongly suggests that Safiya was *taking advantage of him by charging him rent for the brothel room.) Deven's refusal to read Imtiaz's poems shows that, for all his growth in the novel, his sexism won't budge. He, too, misses out as a result. After all, Imtiaz's poems could be even greater than Nur's—and Deven could be the one who "discovers" her for the academic world. But rather than taking a chance on her work, he prefers to cling to Nur's—even though Nur has given him almost nothing useful. Of course, the novel is speaking out against sexism in Indian society and the literary world through Imtiaz. After all, Desai has had to fight many of the same prejudices as Imtiaz throughout her career. While her earlier novels focused on sexism and patriarchy more directly,* In Custody *largely leaves them in the background, in part to show readers what it looks like from men's perspective when society normalizes women's oppression and exclusion.*

The next day, Deven goes to the college to schedule an appointment with the Principal so that he can explain and apologize for the **tape**. On his way out, the mailman hands him another letter. The Principal is busy, so Deven goes to visit Siddiqui instead. But his house isn't there: it's being demolished. Deven finds him by a tree, and he explains that he sold the land to a businessman from Delhi.

Siddiqui's decision to sell his house is a metaphor for independent India's fateful decision to collectively embrace modernity over tradition. Siddiqui has grown tired of living in the crumbling ruins of his ancestors' mansion—just as India has grown tired of defining itself by its centuries-old precolonial history. So, he decides to abandon the past, embrace the future, and (presumably) move to Delhi. But the core of the novel's plot—Deven's desire to preserve Nur's poetry—shows that Desai wonders whether there might be a middle ground, in which Indians can bring the best of their past into the future (instead of having to choose between them).

Deven asks if Siddiqui will come to the board meeting tomorrow and help defend his research, but Siddiqui says that he's busy and that the **tape** is worthless. Deven shows Siddiqui the room bill, and Siddiqui says the college will never pay it (but offers to try persuading them). Deven complains that everyone cheated him, from Murad and Jain to Nur and his wives, but Siddiqui says that Deven shouldn't have let them. Deven begs Siddiqui to recognize that his underlying motive was his love for Nur and his poetry.

Siddiqui tells Deven the hard truth and fully gives up on helping him. This leaves Deven feeling even more profoundly disappointed than before, because after losing hope in Murad and Nur, he thought that Siddiqui was the one person left who truly valued literature for its own sake. While Deven is right to say that Murad, Jain, Nur, Imtiaz, and Safiya cheated him, he portrays himself as a helpless victim who had no power to defend himself, which simply isn't true. Siddiqui points him to a more reasonable middle ground: loving literature doesn't have to mean sacrificing everything in one's life for it.

On his way home, Deven opens the letter he received that morning. It's from Nur, who complains that his pigeons are dying of a mysterious disease. He claims that he needs money to go to Mecca before he meets the same fate. Suddenly, Deven's rickshaw nearly crashes into one of his students, who mutters: "Meet us behind the college and see what we do to you."

Fully aware that Nur is preying on his sense of pity, Deven ignores the letter. But, unlike with Imtiaz's poems, he at least reads it. This is because Imtiaz's poetry poses a deep threat to Deven's sense of self—if it's as great as he fears, this would show him that his reverence for Nur was misguided all along. In contrast, Nur's childish requests for money pose no such threat, because Deven knows that they are insincere, and he will not agree to them. And while his students' threat is totally separate—and much more imminent—it's based on the same principle: taking advantage of Deven's love for literature to manipulate him into giving them what they want.

That night, Deven can't sleep, so he paces around the courtyard, smoking. After hearing Mrs. Bhalla's friends singing, he decides to leave the house and go walk down by the canal. He doesn't want the day to come: he will have to deal with the board meeting, his **tape**, and his bills. He worries that he will have to sell Sarla's jewelry to pay the bills, and that Manu will grow up thinking of him as a failure. As he fantasizes about his student showing up with a knife and killing him, he realizes he has reached the spot where he and Manu saw the flock of **parrots**.

The novel's ending closely mirrors events from past chapters. The scene of Deven anxiously pacing around his house and hearing Mrs. Bhalla sing comes straight from Chapter Eight. And then he goes to the same spot by the river where he shared a precious moment of connection with Manu in Chapter Four. This repetition suggests that Deven is once again falling into the errors of the past—and the novel's conclusion will emphasize whether (and how) he can break free from the patterns that have prevented him from advancing, both personally and professionally. (While being murdered might be one way to avoid repeating the same errors and facing the challenges of the day ahead, there simply must be a better option.)

Deven decides that he must hold onto his good memories of Nur, like the time they recited his work back and forth to each other. He tries to remember how it felt when he was wholeheartedly devoted to and grateful for the man. And then he realizes that, just as he became "the custodian of Nur's genius," so Nur "place[d] him in custody too." He imagines Nur's funeral and asks himself if even death could sever their connection. He looks down around him, noticing a whirlpool in the canal and the first glimmer of twilight reflecting off the grass. He suddenly feels proud to be the "custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit." Inspired and emboldened, he turns around and starts running home to face the day's challenges.

The novel closes with the moment of personal transformation that Deven was waiting for all along: he has an epiphany about his relationship with Nur, which gives him the courage and moral clarity that he needs to finally take charge of his own life. In the past, he alternated between unrealistic optimism and defeatist pessimism: he either assumed that everything would work out in his favor or simply gave up and blamed other people for his failure. In no case did he take control of his life and his work—until now, when he realizes that he is responsible for Nur's legacy and must do whatever is in his power to save it. Indeed, he spent the whole novel complaining about how Nur, Murad, and others selfishly mistreated and controlled him (or put him in their "custody"). But now, he sees that he was using them for his own selfish purposes, too. Namely, he was using them to advance his own career: he wanted to build a career off rediscovering and analyzing Nur's work. So, he put Nur "in custody," too—in other words, he took responsibility for how the world remembers Nur and his work. In this sense, Deven has achieved exactly what he wanted: he is now the person closest to Nur's poetry—and to Nur's "soul and spirit." And he is arguably the new guardian of India's Urdu poetic tradition.

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