
Navigating Devotion: Familial Duty and the Complexities of Parent-Child Relationships in Anita Desai's *A Devoted Son*

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Abstract:

Anita Desai's short story *A Devoted Son* offers a poignant exploration of the intricate dynamics between familial duty and personal autonomy within the Indian cultural context. This paper delves into the nuanced portrayal of the parent-child relationship. It focuses on the evolving bond between Rakesh, a dutiful son and accomplished doctor, and his ageing father, Varma. Through a critical analysis, the study examines how Desai articulates the tensions arising from generational expectations, the shifting roles within the family structure, and the psychological complexities that accompany ageing and caregiving. By integrating textual evidence and scholarly interpretations, the paper elucidates the delicate balance between respect, control, and compassion, ultimately questioning the true essence of devotion in familial relationships. In doing so, the paper not only underscores the emotional burden that filial piety can impose but also highlights the unspoken emotional rift that can develop within families when love becomes obligation and care transforms into control.

Keywords: Familial duty, parent-child relationship, ageing, filial piety, Indian culture**Introduction:**

Anita Desai, renowned for her incisive exploration of human relationships and societal norms, presents in *A Devoted Son* a compelling narrative that encapsulates the complexities of familial duty within the Indian milieu. The story gives an account of the life

of Rakesh, who has humble beginnings but works hard to become a successful doctor. He epitomises the ideal son and is regarded as ‘that pearl amongst pearls’ (Desai, p. 114) for his unwavering care and commitment to his parents. However, as the narrative unfolds, Desai intricately weaves a tale that challenges the simplistic notion of devotion, revealing the underlying tensions and emotional turmoil that can accompany such filial piety. The relationship between Rakesh and his father Varma becomes a battleground for clashing perceptions of care and respect. This paper aims to dissect the multifaceted parent-child relationship depicted in the story, highlighting how cultural expectations, personal aspirations, and the inevitable process of ageing converge to create a tapestry of love, resentment, and misunderstood intentions. Through Desai’s rich characterisations and symbolic elements, the story invites a deeper conversation about the nature of duty, the emotional costs of caregiving, and the shifting dynamics of family life.

The Cultural Context of Filial Piety:

The concept of filial piety is deeply rooted and highly valued in Indian society. The Indian children are expected to honour, respect and care for their parents, especially in their old age. This cultural norm is evident in Rakesh’s actions, as he consistently demonstrates respect and obedience towards his parents. His gesture of touching his father’s feet upon receiving his medical results symbolises this deep-rooted tradition of reverence. The act is not merely ceremonial but signifies a lifelong commitment to placing parental honour above personal ambition. Such actions are not merely personal choices but are reflective of societal expectations that dictate the roles and responsibilities within a family. Indian culture places a high value on intergenerational responsibility, and a son’s success is often considered a testament to parental upbringing. Rakesh, embodying this ideal, not only excels academically but consciously chooses to remain within the domestic fold, even when opportunities abroad beckon. This decision highlights how cultural values often override individual aspirations.

Yet, Desai subtly hints at the emotional cost of such a sacrifice. While society applauds Rakesh’s devotion, the narrative reveals the internal frictions that arise when traditional expectations meet the complexities of modern life. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the external markers of success—academic achievement, a stable career, and familial obedience—do not guarantee emotional harmony within the household. The burden of upholding societal ideals weighs heavily on Rakesh, whose actions, though commendable in the public eye, become increasingly isolating. His personal desires, emotional needs, and individuality are gradually eclipsed by the overwhelming pressure to fulfil his role as ‘a perfect son and a miraculously good-natured man...’ (Desai, p. 113). Desai thus critiques the rigidity of cultural constructs that fail to accommodate the emotional nuances of human relationships.

Rakesh's Ascendancy and the Burden of Expectations:

Rakesh's academic and professional achievements are a source of immense pride for his family, particularly his father, Varma. From the perspective of the patriarch, Rakesh's success vindicates years of sacrifice and struggle. His ability to rise from a modest background to become a respected doctor is seen as a victory not just for himself but for the entire family. Yet, this very success becomes a double-edged sword. With it comes an unspoken burden—the expectation to continually fulfil familial duties without question. Rakesh's decision to return to India, marry a girl chosen by his mother, and care for his ageing father underscores his commitment to these expectations, even at the expense of personal desires. Anita Desai beautifully captures the deep familial and societal expectations placed on Indian sons to fulfil the dreams of their family in return for the sacrifices made by them for their education in the following lines:

“Rakesh was the first son in the family to receive an education, so much had been sacrificed in order to send him to school and then medical college, and at last the fruits of their sacrifice had arrived, golden and glorious.” (Desai, p. 111)

The above passage underscores the immense expectations placed upon Rakesh by his family. Being the first to attain higher education, his achievements are seen not just as personal successes but as the culmination of his family's sacrifices. This societal and familial pressure to fulfil and embody the family's aspirations exemplifies the burden of expectations that Rakesh carries throughout his life.

However, Desai presents this commitment not as heroic but as fraught with internal conflict. While Rakesh may outwardly conform, his professional persona increasingly dominates his personal relationships, suggesting a dissonance between what is expected of him and how he actually feels. This subtle conflict emerges when he begins to treat his father not as a son would treat a parent, but as a doctor would treat a patient. The shift in relational dynamics becomes a point of contention. It suggests that devotion, when devoid of emotional sensitivity, can morph into something cold and clinical. Rakesh's commitment to his familial duties is absolute, yet it becomes clear that his approach is informed more by obligation than by affection. His interactions with Varma, especially in matters of health, are governed by a medicalised view that prioritises physical well-being over emotional comfort. This clinical distance, while perhaps unintentional, reveals a fundamental disconnect between the son's intentions and the father's emotional needs. Desai uses this disjunction to challenge the traditional notion that obedience and success are the ultimate markers of devotion.

The Dichotomy of Roles - Son Versus Doctor

As Varma's health deteriorates, Rakesh assumes the dual role of a son and a doctor. This duality becomes a source of conflict, as his medical interventions, though well-intentioned, are perceived by Varma as controlling and devoid of empathy. The imposition

of

dietary restrictions and medications, while medically sound, strips Varma of his autonomy and the simple pleasures that bring him joy. Rakesh seems to be struggling to maintain the balance between his roles as a son and a doctor and seems to be ‘acting like he must keep his father alive to prove his abilities as a doctor and to seem like a dutiful son (Jotted Lines, 2022).’ This tension highlights the challenges inherent in balancing professional responsibilities with emotional sensitivity, especially within the intimate spheres of family.

Varma’s Perception of Control and Loss of Autonomy:

From Varma’s perspective, Rakesh’s actions, though cloaked in care, represent a loss of control over his own life. The denial of his favourite foods and the regimented routines imposed upon him are seen not as acts of love but as infringements on his freedom. Varma, while interacting with one of his friends, Bhatia, reveals his belief that personal choice - even in trivial matters like food - is crucial to retaining a sense of identity. He complains,

“My own son. If I ask him for one more piece of bread, he says, no, Papa, I weighed out the *ata* myself and I can’t allow you to have more than two hundred grammes of cereal a day. He weighs the food he gives me, Bhatia – he has scales to weigh it on. That is what it has come to.” (Desai, p. 117)

In the above dialogue, which articulates Varma’s inner turmoil and longing for agency, Varma expresses his feelings of helplessness and loss of autonomy. Despite being cared for by his son, he perceives Rakesh’s strict control over his diet as a denial of his personal freedom. The act of weighing food symbolises the extent of control exerted over him, leading to a sense of indignity and frustration in his twilight years. Varma’s complaint also highlights a significant shift in control from parent to child, a reversal that leaves the ageing father feeling infantilised. Though Rakesh’s actions stem from concern, Varma experiences them as a loss of dignity and autonomy - a fundamental alteration of the power dynamic that governed their relationship in the past.

This perception is exacerbated by the generational gap and the shift in power dynamics, where the once authoritative father now finds himself at the mercy of his son’s decisions. Varma’s sense of helplessness and resentment is a poignant commentary on the emotional struggles faced by the elderly in maintaining their dignity and independence.

The Silent Struggles of Caregiving:

Although there is a lack of appreciation for Rakesh’s steadfast dedication and commitment to his father’s care, he never falls short of his duties towards his old father. In spite of the increasing hostility and familial tension, his unchanging love and caring for his father remain the same. This sense of duty, despite difficulties, sheds light on the often-overlooked emotional toll of caregiving. His internal conflict between adhering to his professional knowledge and responding to his father’s emotional needs illustrates the complexities faced by caregivers who must navigate the fine line between doing what is

medically best and what is emotionally comforting. Desai subtly portrays this struggle, emphasising the sacrifices and emotional labour involved in caregiving.

The Role of Communication in Familial Relationships:

In her 'Review of Diamond Dust', a collection of stories by Anita Desai, Sylvia Brownrigg observes, 'in Desai's fictional worlds, food is often the most expressive means of communication between husband and wife, parent and child. To her, you are -- culturally, familiarly, emotionally -- what you eat.' (Brownrigg, 2000). However, food is not the most expressive means of communication in this story. On the contrary, food becomes a cause of acrimony between Rakesh and Varma. It is quite clear that a lack of open and empathetic communication is a significant factor contributing to the deterioration of Rakesh and Varma's relationship. Rakesh's clinical approach to his father's care, devoid of emotional engagement, leads to misunderstandings and feelings of alienation. Conversely, Varma's inability to express his needs and frustrations constructively results in passive-aggressive behaviours and resentment. This communication gap underscores the importance of emotional intelligence and dialogue in nurturing healthy familial relationships.

The Symbolism of Food and Autonomy:

Food, in the narrative, emerges as a powerful symbol of autonomy and comfort. Varma's longing for sweets and fried foods is not merely about taste but represents a desire for control and the preservation of identity amidst the vulnerabilities of ageing. Rakesh's denial of these foods, though medically justified, becomes a metaphor for the larger theme of autonomy versus control within the parent-child dynamic. This symbolism adds depth to the narrative, highlighting the emotional significance of seemingly mundane aspects of care.

The Irony of Devotion:

The title *A Devoted Son* carries with it a sense of irony, as Rakesh's devotion, while unwavering, leads to unintended emotional harm. His strict adherence to duty and medical protocols, devoid of emotional warmth, results in a strained relationship with his father. This irony prompts readers to question the true nature of devotion - is it the fulfilment of obligations, or does it encompass emotional understanding and empathy? Desai challenges the conventional definitions of devotion, urging a more holistic and compassionate approach to familial duty.

The Broader Implications - Ageing and Societal Attitudes:

Beyond the individual narrative, Desai's story reflects broader societal attitudes towards ageing and the elderly. Varma's experiences mirror the challenges faced by many elderly individuals who grapple with feelings of obsolescence, loss of autonomy, and the struggle to maintain dignity in the face of physical decline. Because of such crippling experiences, 'Varma's personal life essentially becomes a tragedy (Jotted Lines, 2022).' The story serves as a critique of societal structures that often prioritise efficiency and control over

empathy and respect for the elderly, calling for a more compassionate and inclusive approach to ageing.

Conclusion:

Anita Desai's *A Devoted Son* masterfully captures the intricate interplay between familial duty, personal autonomy, and the emotional complexities of ageing. Through the evolving relationship between Rakesh and Varma, the story delves into the challenges of caregiving, the importance of empathetic communication, and the nuanced understanding of devotion. Desai's narrative serves as a poignant reminder that true devotion transcends mere obligation, encompassing emotional sensitivity, respect for autonomy, and a deep understanding of the individual's needs and desires. In a society where familial duty is revered, the story urges a re-evaluation of how such duties are fulfilled, advocating for a balance between care and compassion.

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