

## Unfolding the Inner Voice of the Old Age as Depicted in *A Devoted Son* by Anita Desai

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### ABSTRACT

The research paper addresses the conflict between the old father and the dutiful, loving, caring, responsible son through the critical analysis of Anita Desai's *A Devoted Son*. It analyses the psychological unrest in old age. It throws light on old age where resistance is not heard, mental and emotional crises are ignored, the existence is shadowed and an agony remains unnoticed. The paper presents the two generations' gap between father and son in choices, expectations, understanding and thinking. After the death of wife, the signs of loneliness, depression, and decline of health started growing in the old father. The paper addresses how Anita Desai has presented the old age problems. The professional and authoritative care creates the gap between son and father relationship. The retirement from forty years service and the death of wife made the old father lonely. The son's inability to understand the inner desire of the old father leads to disinterest in life and the urge to die. It extracts the old age problems described in the story- loneliness, controlled life, inability to understand psychological unrest, social disconnect, loss of presence, identity and authority, lack of empathy etc. It describes strategies to address these problems- value the old parents' freedom and dignity, develop social and family engagement, and understand inner desires carefully.

**Keywords:** *Old age, mental agony, plea, conflict in relations, psychological unrest, loss of authority*

Literature is a tool of presenting expressions in various forms of writing such as novels, poems, short stories, drama etc. The writers deal extensively with emotions, feelings, and experiences that occur in life. He/she gives voice to the unvoiced issues through literature. The depiction of social, political, environmental and financial issues makes the reader aware about the happenings in human life. The Indian writers present Indian sensibilities in their writing. They deal with the social, political, environmental, economical issues observed in society. They address the topics such as inequality, exploitation, poverty, cultural conflicts, blending of traditional and modern systems, values, ethics etc. The dilemma, agony, struggle that are faced by human beings are depicted in the literature. Words are used to give voice to unvoiced or unnoticed people. Two short stories discussed in this paper present the treatment given to the elderly people. Anita Desai, an Indian English Writer, depicts the psychological trauma, mental anguish, and struggle with

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one's own self. She writes about old age pleas in a short story *A Devoted Son*. The story presents the life journey of a father and his emotional agony at old age. Bhisham Sahni, wrote novels, short stories, and dramas in Hindi language. Some of his works are translated into English. He portrayed his social observations and experiences in his writing. Bhisham Sahni in *A Dinner for Boss* describes the treatment given by the son to his old mother. Both the short stories address the issues in old age. The paper brings into notice that the short story is just not a narrative, in fact it is a narrative of how to follow the duties without disturbing the individual's freedom. This story gives voice to all such old fathers who are burdened with their dutiful son's devotion. It also gives a message to the dutiful sons to listen to the delicate inner voice of the old and lonely parents.

### **A DEVOTED SON: CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

*A Devoted Son* is a short story of Mr. Verma, an old man. He retired from his post at the kerosene dealer. His son Rakesh was brilliant. He brought happiness to the family with his successful academic and professional career. Mr. and Mrs. Verma were proud of such a brilliant, obedient and kind son -Rakesh. Mr. Verma. The Verma family celebrates the success of Rakesh at various stages- he was the first child to take education, he stood first in the country, he went to America for further education and there also pursued his career in the most prestigious hospitals. The most prideful thing for the Verma family was that Rakesh follows the family traditions and customs, respects and cares for family members. Mrs. Verma died due to health issues. Rakesh being a doctor, took all kinds of care. After the death of wife Mr. Verma felt alone. Rakesh also shifted his residence with his parents. Mr. Verma retired from the job and became old. All these have a significant impact on Mr. Verma.

He started complaining and felt ill. It became difficult to differentiate between the real illness and the illness to seek attention. Rakesh took all the care of his father. He paid personal attention to Mr. Verma's medicine and diet. The people appreciated Rakesh for his careful and responsible nature. Though all the things seem good, Mr. Verma was feeling lonely, depressed, and stressed. It is because his diet was designed by Rakesh. He was a dutiful, careful and responsible doctor. But the father expected something more than that. He wanted someone to understand his emotions and feelings.

Mr. Verma wanted to eat the things he liked but Rakesh denied all these under the name of health precaution and care. Rakesh believed that this planned diet would improve his father's health. Once Mr. Verma asked his grandson to bring jalebi from the market without informing his parents. Rakesh caught it and did not allow Mr. Verma to eat sweet or fried food. He abandoned all kinds of food that Mr. Verma wanted to eat under the name of not taking any health risk. There was no one to listen to Mr. Verma's desires. No one cared for his being upset for not getting the food he loved to eat. The careful and loving Rakesh became the strict and commanding son while providing food. It made Mr. Verma unhappy.

Meanwhile Mr. Verma's companions visited him irregularly. The only joy remaining in his life was to talk with his friends. He shared with Mr. Bhatia his desire to eat the food he liked with test and quantity which was strictly forbidden by his son Rakesh. The discussion between both the friends reveal the urge of a father to eat the food he likes and the denial of the son in the form of a doctor creates a conflict between the father and the son. Mr. Verma loved Rakesh very much. He made sacrifices to educate his son. He found it difficult to accept the restrictions on his food by his dear and prideful son. Due to the compulsion of diet food, Mr. Verma became weak, ill, isolated, and sad. The most dreadful thing was that

no one was there to understand his mental suffering, inner desire. No one was there to fill the gap between the father and the son.

The use of medicine for Mr. Verma's single health complaint, led to the number of pills and tonics and other medicines. Mr. Verma wanted relief from all these but it was not in his hand. His son was beyond understanding the feelings and emotions of the father. Anita Desai had presented the old people's urge to live life naturally and happily. Her keen observation and understanding of the human mind are observed in this story. The story ends with Mr. Verma's desire to die so that he can get relief from the medicines.

### THE PROBLEMS OF OLD AGE ADDRESSED IN THE STORY

**Conflict in relationship:** At the end of the story, when Rakesh asked Mr. Verma about his health, he responded that he was dying. Rakesh answered it by stating that his father was joking. It presents the detachment, unrest and loss of hope of being understood by the other. On the other hand, the son wanted a long life for his father without pain. His attachment to his father did not allow him to stop medicine. It presents the conflict in relationships.

The old father detached himself from everything and prayed for death. He wanted to break all emotional attachment with his dear son because of his son's inability to understand what his father really expects. On the other hand, the son was deeply attached to his father. He wanted to provide all kinds of medicine that gave relief from all troubles. He paid attention to physical health. The conflict developed between the father and son.

**Need of social interaction:** Mr. Verma, after the death of his wife, found relief in discussion with friends. He enjoyed the company of his friends and sharing with them. Sharing of thoughts, feelings and getting listened to by someone, these things made Mr. Verma happy. It reveals the role of social connection in old age as it is one of the sources to get engaged.

**Loss of presence, identity and authority:** The story begins with the celebration of son's success by offering sweets. Here, the authority was in the hands of the father. He decided how to celebrate. The relatives, friends and neighbours appreciated the parents. Their presence was valued. They had their identity of being father and mother. Just as the time passed, they became old and remained alone. There was nothing to give credit for any achievements of the son as the son was now grown up and getting success on his own brilliance and skills. The role of father was not appreciated. There was no authority, as the father was asked to follow the instructions given by the son. All these leads to loss of presence, identity and authority. It becomes difficult to accept this change in old age.

**Psychological distress turning into physical illness:** After retirement and the death of wife, Mr. Verma felt lonely and ignorant. Frequent loneliness and grief made him sad and it resulted in frequent illness. It became difficult for family members to identify the real illness and illness for attention seeking. His lying still increased the tension and anxiety in the family. The continuous happenings of the same created confusion in the mind of the son. The father wanted to convey his inner pain through such attention seeking activities and the responsible and devoted son brought medicines for every pain. The son, being a doctor, analyzes each pain or physical complaint from a medical point of view. He tried to give relief by providing medicine. But the real cause of the illness remained as it was due to lack of treatment. The mental illness of the father was unnoticed as it was not visible but the physical illness was treated as it was visible. The inability to understand old age mental status might lead to severe health issues.

**Lack of empathy:** The son took control on the father's diet and put restrictions on eating. He banned craving food- sweets, halawa, fried food- for the father. It reflects the clash between personal comfort and medical advice. The son's caring and loving nature changed into authoritative nature. The purpose of these restrictions was to safeguard the father's life. But for the father it was control over his choice to eat. The father, being old sought empathy from his dear one. At this stage, the only deer to win and hope was his son. Unfortunately, the brilliant and skillful doctor did not understand the old father's expectations.

Aspects of old age that need to be taken into consideration:

***Ways to achieve the well being of the old age people:***

The story suggests some of the areas of old age need to be addressed skillfully. The life story of Mr. Verma explains the kind of life he lived. His father used to sell vegetables in the market. He did not get a chance to take education. He also worked in the kerosine depot. But he sent his children to school and gave them a good education. After many sacrifices in his life, his son became a doctor which was a pride moment for the father. He was happy to have a bright, skillful, obedient, loving and caring son. But in old age, his expectations were changed. Being lonely, he wanted someone to understand him well. There is a need to notice the changes in the expectations while dealing with the problems in old age.

**Convert Loneliness into social connections:** There is a need to develop social connections of the old people. Sharing with friends of the same age gives relief. The feelings of being heard or someone listening to remove loneliness and give reason to live a happy life. Meeting and greeting people, getting identity and noticing all these provide energy to live life happily in the old age.

**Value freedom and independence:** The old age is generally considered as dependency. Instead of nurturing or following this type of feeling, develop the confidence of being independent. Develop the surrounding environment that promotes this feeling of being independent. Also value the freedom of thoughts, desires and feelings if they are not harmful. The belief of getting valued protects self-esteem.

**Get engaged and involved in family:** It is important to get the old people involved in the family discussion. The attention should be given to their thoughts and feelings. Active engagement in family routine work can give them relief from getting unnoticed.

**Address physical and mental health problems carefully:** The root cause of physical and mental health issues need to be identified after critical analysis. Along with medication, gentle care needs to be taken while handling the problems of old people.

**Provide meaning to end life:** It is the responsibility of the family members to provide a goal/objective/cause of life in old age. This will give a meaning for existence and energy to work for the achievement of this target.

## CONCLUSION

Anita Desai in the short story *A Devoted Son* talks about old age problems. She has depicted the plea of the old man to understand his unsaid words. The controlled diet, excessive medicine, loss of social connection, feelings of being unnoticed in the family, all these made the old man sad. The story addresses various old age issues such as the struggle to regain the identity, the failure to communicate what is inner feelings, the desire to live a happy,

respectful and free line. The story talks about the fine balance between the duties, responsibilities, respect, devotion and the freedom of the other person. The care taking, responsible and devotional nature of the son cause the conflict between the old father and the successful son because the individual's feelings, opinions and freedom are not valued. The story gives a message that gentle care needs to be taken while dealing with old age problems. The paper brings into notice that the short story is just not a narrative, in fact it is a narrative of how to follow the duties without disturbing the individual's freedom. This story gives voice to all such old fathers who are burdened with their dutiful son's devotion. It also gives a message to the dutiful sons to listen to the delicate inner voice of the old and lonely parents.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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