



# Tracing Anita Desai's Traumatic Childhood In Her Works

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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. The story begins with Rakesh achieving academic excellence and his family celebrating his success. As Rakesh's career progresses, he becomes a renowned doctor, but his father's health deteriorates, leading to a shift in their dynamics. Rakesh, once an obedient and loving son, transforms into a controlling figure, imposing strict dietary restrictions and medication on his father. Despite the elderly Varma's pleas for a more relaxed approach to his health, Rakesh remains adamant. The story concludes with a poignant scene where Varma rejects Rakesh's medication, symbolizing his desire for a peaceful departure.

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

## INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is a distinguished voice in post-independence Indian English fiction among the contemporary novelists writing in Indian English. She belongs to the generation of novelists on the Indian English scenario who rose to eminence since the seventies. She rose to prominence with the publication of her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963). Anita Desai, herself writes psychological novels, which she narrates as “purely subjective”. She very aptly analyses her psychological feeling and says:

It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends upon observation rather than a private vision. (Dhawan 255)

Desai's works are different from those of other Indian women writers in English-Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Attia Hossain. These writers mainly concern themselves with politics, Eastwest encounter and social issues. Desai is concerned with the inner psyche of her characters. She aims at exploring their psychological crises and struggles. Her novels try to focus on the bafflement of the individual psyche confronted with the hostile socio-cultural environment and modern promise of self-gratification and selffulfillment. In the face of this dual onslaught, her protagonists- Maya, Uma, Manisha, Nanda and Raka, Bim and Tara, Arun, Deven, Baumgartner are seen poised at different juncture of their life. In some of her novels she portrays the usual psyche of children and seems to assert that if a child is denied of love and affection because of the negligence and irresponsibility on the part of the parents, he or she may turn out to be a problematic, maladjusted child. This research article attempts to scrutinize Anita Desai's novel *Fasting Feasting* (1999) to explore the assumption that the traumatic childhood experiences of the characters have contributed largely to their inability to establish and maintain personal relationships in later life. Childhood has for long been one of the central themes of English literature. The word 'childhood' refers to a distinct period of human life. However, Childhood is a complex term. It refers to a set of experiences and behaviours, characteristics for the earlier part of human lives, meant to prepare human beings for adulthood. Childhood is a formative period for his entire life. The child discovers the beauty and sweetness of human relationship through love and affection from their parents and other care givers. But parents, in many instances, have no time or inclination to fulfill their children's emotional need. In most cases, parents' commitment to materialistic values has become more important than their responsibility to their children. Such negation of parenthood usually causes various mental disorders and adversely affects child's psychology. Children neglected by their parents frequently develop a sense of inferiority complex. Such indifference on the part of the parents either makes the child diffident and submissive or develops a protesting and repulsive attitude in the child. An unhappy home environment also creates fear, insecurity, distrust and anxiety in growing children. For healthy growth, a child needs an orderly and secure world.

## Parenting styles

Based on the interconnection between the manner parents or caregivers express their affection and their child's response, it can be concluded that whether a child is prone to behave according to one pattern or the other depends on a particular parenting style. Diana Baumrind's groundbreaking study titled "Child Care Practices Antecedent Three Patterns of Preschool Behavior" explores the relationship between different parenting styles and their impact on children's behavior during their preschool years. This study, conducted in 1967, laid the foundation for understanding the various ways parents interact with their children and how these interactions can shape children's development. Based on the data she collected, Baumrind distinguished three types of parenting: Authoritarian parenting style, Authoritative parenting style and Permissive parenting style. Authoritative Parenting: This style is often considered the most balanced and effective. Authoritative parents are responsive and warm, while also setting clear expectations and boundaries. They encourage independence and decision-making in their children, promoting a healthy sense of autonomy. Children raised by authoritative parents tend to be self-reliant, socially competent, and display higher levels of self-esteem. Authoritarian Parenting: Authoritarian parents are highly demanding and directive, but lack warmth and responsiveness. They establish strict rules and expectations, and often use punitive measures to enforce them. Children raised under this style may develop a strong sense of obedience, but they may also exhibit lower self-esteem, poorer social skills, and a tendency to conform rather than think critically. Permissive Parenting: Permissive Parenting style included not only parents who easily succumbed to their children's whims but also indifferent parents - they also discipline low amount of control over their children. However, the reason for giving their children freedom to do whatever they like is very different: over-indulgence on one hand and the lack of interest on the other. Furthermore, the outcomes of indifferent upbringing differ from those of permissive one. Therefore Eleanor Maccoby with John Martin introduced later a fourth parenting style, the Uninvolved parenting style. These four parenting patterns are closely discussed in several publications on developmental psychology.

Uma's Relationship with Her Parents: Uma, the eldest daughter in the family, is expected to fulfill traditional gender roles and serve her parents. Her mother, MamaPapa, is overbearing and controlling, while her father, Papa, is distant and uninvolved. Uma's life revolves around her duty to her parents, and she is often confined to the domestic sphere.

Arun's Relationship with His Parents: Arun, Uma's younger brother, is sent to the United States for higher education. His parents, especially his mother, have high expectations for his academic success. However, this creates a sense of pressure and isolation for Arun. He is emotionally distant from his parents and often yearns for more independence. Arun's relationship with his parents is marked by emotional detachment. He reflects on his life in the U.S. and his family's expectations with the following words: "It had been long since Arun had been expected, or had expected himself, to explain himself to anyone."

Baumrind's Parenting Styles in "Fasting, Feasting" Diana Baumrind's theory identifies four parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and neglectful. These styles can be seen in the interactions between Uma, Arun, and their parents.

Uma- a daughter of authoritarian parents Uma's parents, MamaPapa, epitomize authoritarian parenting. They impose strict rules and expect unwavering obedience. This authoritarian style stifles Uma's autonomy and independence, compelling her to conform to traditional gender roles. Baumrind defines this style as one that is high in control but low in warmth. "Every morning Uma was required to rise at four, before dawn, and begin the housework... Her role was to serve, and that she did, and continued to do." (Desai 94)

Arun – a son of authoritarian parents The day Arun was born was perhaps the happiest day in his father's life. However, the feeling of happiness was soon exchange for worries about his son's progress, diet, education and future and as his father wanted to be sure that his only son get the best of everything, he watched over Arun's achievement and made a step-by-step plans for him. Arun's parents sometimes exhibit an authoritative parenting style. "Arun, my son, you have responsibilities now. You must study hard." (124) But later on they have high expectations for his academic success, they provide him with emotional support and guidance. They value education for their son- "If one word could sum up Arun's childhood—or at least Uma's abiding impression of it—that word was education...then it was education for his son: the best, the most, the highest." (Desai 121)

Everything was for Arun scheduled, even when and what he should eat, when and how and with whom he can play and this planning obsession, this constant need of control over Arun's life, got worse with Arun entering school years. Arun has learnt to accept his daily routine the way it was and yet there have been moments his father thought that Arun had done things so as to spite him. For instance, his son refused to eat eggs and meat, a privilege his father was so proud of. Furthermore, his only son has always been fragile, making his father never happy with Arun's progress, exclaiming once: "have you seen the Joshis' son: he is already playing cricket!" (Desai 32) Perhaps because of all those difficult times when the father had to study at night under a street lamp it is so important for him that Arun gets the best education possible with the goal of sending him abroad to foreign university so that he can get a foreign degree. Year after year Arun went to school only to return to more tutoring at home that ended shortly before the sun-set, leaving only little room or energy for playing or anything else. Finally, when the letter of acceptance from an American university arrives, Uma expects Arun to show some feeling of joy or fear, relief or sadness but Arun's face shows no such thing. He has just a blank face devoid any expression. Laughter, smiles and frowns have been taken from him by the strict regime and now he will go abroad just because his father wishes him to not because it is something that he wants. Thus, it can be said that Arun has suffered and is suffering because he is his parents' only son and their way how to fulfil the dreams they once dreamt for themselves. His parents want only the best for him. Yet, it is what they think is the best for him and not what Arun might want or like, not even letting him to find out what that might be. Thus, in "Fasting, Feasting," Anita Desai masterfully weaves a narrative that allows readers to witness the varied outcomes of different parenting styles. The application of Diana Baumrind's theory of parenting reveals how these styles shape the characters' experiences and destinies. The analysis shows Desai's inclination to portray such parenting styles that instil insecurity in children. The results prove that these approaches to raising a child affect the personality development negatively. It was interesting to find out that gender bias influences not



only the lifepath and self-concept of the protagonists but also the quality of their relationship with their parents.

## COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS:

### 1. Themes:

- **Filial Duty and Sacrifice:** The story explores the traditional Indian theme of a son's duty to his parents. Rakesh's journey from a devoted son to a strict disciplinarian reflects the sacrifices made in the pursuit of success and societal expectations.
- **Generational Conflict:** There is a stark contrast between the values and priorities of Rakesh and Varma. The younger generation, represented by Rakesh, is focused on modern success and medical achievements, while the older generation, Varma, longs for a simpler, more traditional life.

### 2. Characterization:

- **Rakesh:** Initially portrayed as a dutiful and respectful son, Rakesh's character undergoes a transformation. His success as a doctor leads to a shift in his attitude towards his father, turning him into a stern and controlling figure.
- **Varma:** An aging father who witnesses the changes in his son's behavior. Varma represents the older generation's struggle to cope with the evolving values and priorities of the younger generation.

### 3. Symbolism:

- **Medication and Dietary Restrictions:** Rakesh's imposition of a strict diet and medication symbolizes the control he exercises over his father's life. It reflects the conflict between traditional practices and modern medical interventions.

### 4. Irony:

- **Devotion vs. Control:** The title, "A Devoted Son," carries irony as Rakesh's devotion transforms into a form of control and manipulation. The once-devoted son becomes a rigid enforcer of his own beliefs, restricting Varma's autonomy.

### 5. Cultural Context:

- **Traditional Values:** The story delves into the clash between traditional Indian values of familial love and respect for elders and the emerging influence of modern, Westernized ideals, particularly in the field of medicine and success.

### 6. Emotional Tone:

- **Pathos:** The narrative evokes sympathy for Varma, the elderly father, who longs for a more compassionate and understanding relationship with his son. The emotional tone intensifies as Varma expresses his desire for a peaceful release from his controlled existence.

In conclusion, "A Devoted Son" is a poignant exploration of generational conflict, the impact of success on familial relationships, and the struggle between tradition and modernity. Anita Desai skillfully crafts a narrative that prompts reflection on the complexities of filial duties and the consequences of pursuing individual aspirations at the expense of family bonds.

This shows the diplomatic behavior of her parents. On the one hand, they do not allow her to cross the household and on the other they blamed her for earning nothing. This clearly shows that she is a burden on her parents who themselves does not want her to earn as she is offered twice during the course of the novel. These result in her baffling, her lack of confidence and devoid of an emotional support. Her parents are unkind to her. Her mother never bothers about her daughter Uma. She has a very detached outlook towards her daughter. Such unemotional outlook by her leads to depression, withdrawal, clumsy behavior and hysteria. Nancy Chodorow, one of the feminist psychoanalysts draws her attention towards mother daughter relationship and she argues that mothers experience their daughters as their "doubles" as an extension of their own life. Therefore we can say that daughters find it difficult to form their own niche. Through her novel, Anita Desai tries to reflect the realities of the lives of the common girls. She tries to present the complete disinterestedness of mother towards Uma, which leave her completely shattered. Anita Desai has presented us power of selfishness of a mother towards her daughter. Fasting, Feasting gives us a critique of mother –daughter relationship, tracing it through the character of Uma and her mother. Anita Desai has given us an unforgettable picture of the evolution of Indian woman's psyche. Thus, Fasting Feasting is a warning to the mothers who are completely engrossed in their individual self by rejecting their daughter's right to be loved and cared. It is a pointer to how a mother's influence could be unsettling to the daughter under different circumstances. Thus this paper highlights how a mother, traditionally epitome of sacrifice and goodness could become a symbol of selfishness and resentment to her children and how unconditional love and affection could be replaced.

### **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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