

# ANITA DESAI, 'THE DEVOTED SON'

# THE OPENING GAMBIT

- We may note that **the son bows down and touches his father's feet** – a gesture repeated at crucial points in the story.
- Might this be Desai's way of encapsulating and dramatising, economically, the **shift in attitudes towards the father's 'decline narrative'**?

# FESTIVAL

- The **achievements** of the son are extraordinary and merit celebration.
- Note Desai's **wry humour** as she registers also the mix of emotions felt by the wider family.
- Note also the **use of colour** to highlight the happy mood of a golden occasion.

# 'RESPECT'

- Note, Rakesh's father draws attention to his son's **filial respect and affection**.
- And the **community** acknowledge this, even if they are slightly envious of this traditional respect.

# OLD AGE AS LOSS AND DECLINE NARRATIVE

- But, as the story goes on, the father begins to experience a **collection of ailments**, some of them hard to diagnose and treat.
- This seems to signal the **beginning of a ‘decline narrative’**.

- The **portrait of Varma** is very negative – old age is associated with a veritable **panoply of illnesses**, none of which seem to be treatable and there are hints of **dementia** here too – in the mercurial mood changes.

## VARMA'S DETERIORATION ALIENATES HIS FAMILY

- At a party, seeming comatose, he suddenly sits up and executes a **massive spit** which lands on the hem of his daughter-in-law's organza sari.
- This is regarded as **very gross and uncouth** and the consequence is that people in the family seem to **stop having any caring or compassionate feelings** towards him.
- But the devoted son, is still **most devoted**.

- The old man is very **gratified** by this care, but not by his son's **interference** in his diet.
- This is a not uncommon issue in the **dynamics of caregiver and care receiver** both in the global north and global south.
- The caregiver wants to make sure the older person has nourishing food and not eat stuff that is not considered good – like sweets (halwa). But, the older person might well crave the little sweet tasting thing over 'sensible' food.



# DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF



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## AGON – FATHER AND SON

- We cannot but feel **sympathy for old Varma**, who is straining at a rope which will not break. Varma wants to escape what he sees as a **persecution which goes against nature** – it is his time to die, but his son is keeping him artificially alive and condemning him to a life of misery.
- The sense of **physical agony and discomfort** is very well registered, as the servants, at Rakesh's orders, insist on him taking the evening air. We feel for the old man as he is bumped about, his bones aching.
- His daughter-in-law, **Veena**, while opposing Rakesh, is also an **antagonist**, conspiring in Varma's distress, uncaring, drifting away to her vibrating transistor radio, blaring out its popular love songs.
- **Varma literally disappears** as his name is erased by the sign bearing his son's credentials.

## A SHIFT IN POINT OF VIEW

- But there comes a **shift**, a volta, where old Varma **resists his subjugation** and enacts his own **grim defence**, setting his jaw, with the greatest effort, trying to control his tremor.
- Varma literally turns away from his father.

## AND THE THIRD TIME?

- As the son tenderly reaches out to touch his father's feet, the old man tucks his feet under him. His poor face is out of control.
- This is the third iteration of the **filial gesture of devotion** – but the third time, just like in stories and jokes, there is a big difference; the pattern is broken.
- He **begs to be let die**; it is his last order. He vehemently rejects all the medicines and potions, violently whacking the bottle out of his son's hand.

# WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THE ENDING?



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