

ANITA DESAI, 'THE DEVOTED SON'

Professor Tess Maginess

ANITA DESAI



- Anita Desai On Her Writing Schedule:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kp7Alyyi70>
- Photograph: <https://thewire.in/culture/anita-desai-interview>

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- Born June 24, 1937, Mussoorie, India, English-language Indian novelist and author of children's books who excelled in evoking character and mood through visual images ranging from the meteorologic to the botanical.
- She received a B.A. in English from the University of Delhi in 1957. The suppression and oppression of Indian women were the subjects of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), and a later novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) was criticized as relying too heavily on imagery at the expense of plot and characterization, but it was praised for its poetic symbolism and use of sounds. *Clear Light of Day* (1980), considered the author's most successful work, is praised for its highly evocative portrait of two sisters caught in the lassitude of Indian life.
- Source: [Anita Desai | Fiction Writer, Novelist, Short Story Writer | Britannica](#)

SOME KEY QUESTIONS

- What strikes you?
- Negative representation of ageing – the ‘decline narrative’?
- Ageing and death as natural?
- Challenge to representation of older people as powerless?
- Tension between tradition and modernity / East and West.
- Characterisation: We have two protagonists, not one, as is usually the case in the Western short story.
- What is the effect of this on plot? A more dramatic ‘agon’ develops between the two.
- The structure of the story – western short story, Indian folk tale? How does Desai shape these traditions?
- Could this story have been written in the global north?
- Is the story a metaphor for colonial experience and the subaltern ‘writing back to power’?

A CLOSER LOOK . . .

‘When the results appeared in the morning papers, Rakesh scanned them barefoot and in his pajamas, at the garden gate, then went up the steps to the verandah where his father sat sipping his morning tea and bowed down to touch his feet.’

- The **opening paragraph** of any story is always most important, just like a student essay: the main themes need to be established here and also the tone or point of view.
- Like a student essay, the opening section will be **drafted and redrafted** as, in the writing of the draft, it is hard to know what direction the story will take.
- The opening is like an **overture to a piece of music** – or the introduction to a great song; the opening bars making it afterwards, memorable, enduring.

THE OPENING GAMBIT

What do we notice, what strikes us about this **opening**?

In contrast to the UK, the results are published **in the newspaper** – completely public, thus making Rakesh the centre of attention – under the spotlight.

He gets the results in the **morning** (he is in his pajamas, though this item of clothing is worn in the daytime, not just for sleeping in, within some cultures, like India). The place he lives must be **warm or hot** (he is barefoot).

The family might be fairly **well off** – they have a garden and verandah.

The son is very respectful towards his father, he bows down to touch his feet. This gesture places the story within a **traditional culture** – sons would not do this in Belfast.

A PURE EXCEPTION

“A first division, son?” his father asked, beaming, reaching for the papers.

“At the top of the list, papa,” Rakesh murmured, as if awed. “First in the country.”

There is the moment of suspense – most readers – in India or in Ireland, can identify with this, as a seminal moment arrives; Rakesh’s whole economic future life will turn on this moment.

The father seems to expect the son to achieve a first division, but Rakesh far exceeds this – he is first in the country.

ASCENDING ARC

- So the story begins on a kind of high, in an **ascending arc**. But we know that in Western literature, at least, the classical short story (think of James Joyce) always **ends in deflation** and the hero – who is often a person not important or successful in the eyes of the world, a kind of antihero – realises that his dreams will not be fulfilled.
- Desai **inverts this western set-up** and her hero is, on the contrary, destined for great success – in the world at any rate.

FESTIVAL

‘The whole day long visitors streamed into the small yellow house at the end of the road to congratulate the parents of this *Wunderkind*, to slap Rakesh on the back and fill the house and garden with the sounds and colors of a festival. There were garlands and halwa, party clothes and gifts (enough fountain pens to last years, even a watch or two), nerves and temper and joy, all in a multicolored whirl of pride and great shining vistas newly opened: 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.’



Image source: search on yahoo.com

HALWA

‘RESPECT’

- Note, Rakesh’s father draws attention to **his son’s filial respect and affection**. And this seems to be an attitude rather going out of fashion:

“**One does not often see such behavior in sons any more,” they all agreed, a little enviously perhaps.**’

- So the story is also about **tradition and modernity**, about **past and present**. This is symbolised in the relationship between father and son.



INDIAN FESTIVAL GARLANDS

Image source: Cornfield/Shutterstock.com through Britannica.com

TONE?

- What a scene of **joy**. Note: the celebration is shared by a large community; there is a lot of food, people dress specially in bright colours and there are lots of gifts. The atmosphere is carnivalesque.
- It is also **momentous**; Rakesh is the first son to receive an education. Note, not daughter. And his wonderful achievement has been made possible by the **sacrifice** of parents – so often young people in the West forget this. Note the **alliteration and assonance** – ‘golden and glorious’.
- Tone, point of view? There is a hint of **sly amusement**, mockery even, at the number of fountain pens. And the narrator also sounds a more **realistic, prosaic** note, as she registers ‘nerves’, ‘temper’ as well as joy.

- The narrator continues bracing the **pure joy** of the occasion with further little **prosaic comments** about the attitudes of the community. Some are a bit envious – though not rancorous, recalling how the father, Varma, had never even got to school and had begin as a vegetable seller. But, the narrator is sympathetic to the people also, acknowledging how exceptional Rakesh's destiny is:

‘...not every son in that shabby little colony at the edge of the city was destined to shine as Rakesh shone, and who knew that better than the parents themselves?’

AND AGAIN, THE BOW

- So, the **arc of Rakesh's ascent** continues. And his **filial respect** seems to know no bounds. Having achieved great honours (though not all would appreciate) in the USA (not America – that is for ignorant people – note the narrative judgement here):

'What was more, he came back, he actually returned to that small yellow house in the once-new but increasingly shabby colony, right at the end of the road where the rubbish vans tipped out their stinking contents for pigs to nose in and rag-pickers to build their shacks on, all steaming and smoking just outside the neat wire fences and well-tended gardens. To this Rakesh returned and the first thing he did on entering the house was to slip out of the embraces of his sisters and brothers and bow down and touch his father's feet.'

MAKING SETTING WORK

- What else do we notice about this passage?
- **Repetition** – the son once again bows and touches his father's feet.
- The narrator, in a few swift strokes, registering the setting, conveys the **gap between plenty and want**, between those on the rise and those falling.
- **Point of view, tone?** Is this sentimental – deliberately or otherwise? Is the picture painted a kind of storybook or Bollywood representation of India?

FAIRY TALE

- And, to add to the fairy story, fabular quality of the plot, doesn't Rakesh bow to tradition in the matter of a wife, choosing

'...a plump and uneducated girl, it was true, but so old-fashioned, so placid, so complaisant that she slipped into the household and settled in like a charm, seemingly too lazy and too good-natured to even try and make Rakesh leave home and set up independently, as any other girl might have done.'

- Again, we note the sharp **contrast between tradition and modernity.**

IMPERIUMS?

- Rakesh ends up opening his own clinic:
‘and the large sign-board over the door on which his name was printed in letters of red, with a row of degrees and qualifications to follow it like so many little black slaves of the regent.’
- Is this a slightly disquieting note?
- Is this a reference to the **British Prince Regent (1762-1830)** who became George IV? He was opposed to the abolition of slavery and legislation was delayed for years. He was also infamous for his dissolute lifestyle and his lack of duty to his wife. He was not survived by nay legitimate heirs.
- So why is this **simile** invoked here? Is the narrator subtly **undermining her hero**?

SYMBOLIC COLOURS

What about that **red**?

- Indian philosophers believed there was a link between the creation of the Universe with the three Gunas. The three Gunas or qualities are: *tamas* or darkness, *rajas* or passion, and *sattva* or essence. *Rajas* – associated with red; the color of passion, anger, energy, fire, and activity.

Source: [Color Meanings in India: Find Out What Colors Symbolize in Indian Culture - Color Meanings \(color-meanings.com\)](https://color-meanings.com)

HERO HALO DIMMING?

‘Thereafter his fame seemed to grow just a little dimmer—or maybe it was only that everyone in town had grown accustomed to it at last—but it was also the beginning of his fortune for he now became known not only as the best but also the richest doctor in town.’

- The narrator is both subtly **undermining Rakesh’s heroic status** and **magnifying his material status**. Balancing this, we learn that this *wunderkind* continues to be a devoted son and family man as well as a skilled surgeon with a brain.

OLD AGE AS LOSS AND DECLINE NARRATIVE

- Varma retires, his wife dies:

‘the old father very quickly went to pieces, as they say. He developed so many complaints and fell ill so frequently and with such mysterious diseases that even his son could no longer make out when it was something of significance and when it was merely a peevish whim.’

- What kind of **representation of old age** is this?

DECLINE

- 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.
- But is the narrator being **ironic**? Are Varma's symptoms so uncommon?

THE 'CHALLENGING' OLD MAN

Varma's deterioration alienates his family. At a party, seeming comatose, he suddenly sits up:

'and the distraught daughter-in-law received a gob of red spittle right on the hem of her organza sari. After that no one much cared if he sat up crosslegged on his bed, hawking and spitting, or lay down flat and turned gray as a corpse. Except, of course, for that pearl amongst pearls, his son Rakesh.'

An example of the **Western classical 'senex' figure**.

Rakesh seems, by contrast, to focus on trying to, to make his father comfortable, soothing and settling him.

- But Rakesh's care becomes invasive, imperious, transgressive:

‘All this was very gratifying for the old man. What was not so gratifying was that he even undertook to supervise his father’s diet. One day when the father was really sick, having ordered his daughter-in-law to make him a dish of *soojie halwa* and eaten it with a saucerful of cream, Rakesh marched into the room, not with his usual respectful step but with the confident and rather contemptuous stride of the famous doctor, and declared, “No more *halwa* for you, papa. We must be sensible, at your age. If you must have something sweet, Veena will cook you a little *kheer*, that’s light, just a little rice and milk. But nothing fried, nothing rich. We can’t have this happening again.”’



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SOOJI HALWA AND JALEBI

- Sooji halwa – semolina, sugar, cardamom, ghee, almonds
Source: [Sooji Halwa - Cook With Manali](#)
- Jalebi – Persian-origin sweet that is popular in India, is a treat made from batter that's drizzled into hot oil to deep-fry it, and then briefly soaked in a fragrant saffron-and-cardamom-infused syrup.

Source: [Jalebi Recipe | Best Homemade Jalebi Recipe » Dassana's Veg Recipes \(vegrecipesofindia.com\)](#)



THE SODALITY OF FRIENDS

- Some of us may recognise what is happening here – Rakesh has **good intentions** but fails to accept that ageing and its frailties are part of a **natural cycle of life and death**.
- In constantly surveilling and censoring, Rakesh becomes a **figure of displeasure**, even dread to his father.
- Note how Varma then turns away from his family to gain comfort from the only pleasure left to him – conversations with his **elderly neighbours**.
- Like King Lear, the old man finds solace in the **sodality of friends** – not family, but other older people, 'mostly as decrepit and helpless as he'.

PATOLA AND DHOTI

- Patola - type of silk sari

Source: [Britannica](#)

- Dhoti - South Asian loincloth.

Source: [Britannica](#)

- Note the colonial era image from Britannica.



THE VOLTA: WHO IS THE HERO?

- Varma, confiding to his old neighbour, Bhata, discloses that Rakesh actually weighs the food. This is not unknown in the west, e.g. when liquid intake has to be carefully measured in certain medical conditions.
- Varma sees this as ingratitude from the son who he has educated:

‘His masterly efficiency was nothing but cold heartlessness, his authority was only tyranny in disguise.’

- And here is the **‘volta’ or ‘turn’ in the short story**. This is the point where, in the western version, the unglamorous hero or antihero recognizes some searing truth which illuminates his own powerlessness. Joyce called this the **‘epiphany’**.
- Here Desai has her own twist, because she has built a story which draws upon tales of unadulterated heroes, yet she uses the structure of the western volta to create a kind of unsettling separation – now **it is Varma who emerges as the real hero**, powerless and mistreated. His situation is completely ‘medicalized’ by his son.
- But, of course, the reader is enabled to see the situation from **two opposing points of view** – that of the devoted son and that of the helpless father.

DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF

- What follows is a kind of **deaf dialogue**, where son and father voice their situation, but neither hears or listens to the other. The conflict rises, as their antagonism deepens. This '**rapid fire**' **dialogue**, technically known as **stichomythia**, has its roots in classical Greek drama and is often used in comedy, e.g.. in old Music Hall, or in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.
- The use of **dialogue** (albeit two voices which do not hear each other) is very unusual in a short story, which tends to be dominated by one voice. So, Desai expands the boundaries of the form.

AGON – FATHER AND SON

- We cannot but feel **sympathy** for old Varma, who is straining at a rope which will not break; 'He only hurt himself trying'. 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, 'and the evening air they would make him take-thump'. He is 'propped up stiffly into a sitting position that made his head swim and his back ache.'
- 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 and 'the lovesick tunes from the cinema that she listened to all day'.
- And there are the **little telling details**, literally inscribing Varma's subjugation; 'the newly touched up sign that bore his son's name and qualifications, his own name having vanished from the gate long ago'

A SHIFT IN POINT OF VIEW

- And we can hear now, more distinctly, the narrator's point of view, overtly **mocking the great hero**, the devoted son; 'the great doctor, all in white'.
- Remember the **colour symbolism**; Sattva (essence) – associated with white.
- The **portrait of the father** is shocking, visceral:

'Ever a devoted son, he went first to the corner where his father sat gazing, stricken, at some undefined spot in the dusty yellow air that swam before him. He did not turn his head to look at his son. But he stopped gobbling air with his uncontrolled lips and set his jaw as hard as a sick and very old man could set it.'

AND THE THIRD TIME?

- But we can see a **resistance** here from the old man – a fight back.
- 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 and
'could not make up a whole and convey to the famous man exactly what his father thought of him, his skill, his art.'
- 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.
- Finally, as if he is about to spit a gob of betel;
'he spat out some words, as sharp and bitter as poison, into his son's face. "Keep your tonic,... your medicines..." and he swept the bottle out of his son's hand with a wave of his own, suddenly grand, suddenly effective'.

- Unlike the classical western short story, **the central character is not able to exert any agency**. Here, Varma, who has, in effect become the real hero, does seem to control his future – even though, ironically, it is to die.
- Does this amount to a **call for ‘assisted dying’ or euthanasia** or is the ‘moral of the story’ a lot more complex?

WHAT DO
YOU MAKE
OF THE
ENDING?