

Depiction of Societal Norms in Anita Desai's *A Devoted Son*

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Abstract

In her collection of short stories *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (1978) popular Indian literary figure Anita Desai (b. 1937-) has included eleven different stories. Among these stories, one story *A devoted son* depicts the societal norms of middle-class Indian family in an Indian village. Happiness of parents in the success of their son and the responsibilities of a son towards his mother and father is presented in the story. Rakesh, as the major character of the story, is a role model for following societal norms and becomes the source of inspiration for the new generation to be the devoted son/daughter to their parents. Our society is our home and the societal norms that exist in our society are our identity. This theme is the major focus of Desai in this story. Care of parents during their old age, economic management to run the family, harmonious relations among the members of society, sharing sorrows and happiness with neighbors etc. are the societal norms found in the story. When the text is observed through the theoretical perspective of cultural materialism, this paper wants to clarify that the writer has used societal norms in her story to inform the new generation that it is a part of our culture.

Keywords: Societal norms, culture, society, new generation, relation, identity

Introduction

Anita Desai prefers to write her literary texts with the background of Indian society. She is perfect to create realistic scenarios with the typical Indian characters and the settings in her writing. Her short story *A devoted son* (1978) depicts the theme of societal norms existing in the middle-class family in an Indian society. Through the main character of the story Rakesh; Desai tries to provide knowledge of societal values of India to the readers. Similarly, it is the moral obligation to the new generation to follow societal norms. Duty of a son towards his parents, family and

society is clearly shown in this story. Love towards the motherland, responsibilities towards the family and obeying societal norms are the things to be learnt and followed by the new generation. The role of Rakesh is praiseworthy so the title of the story itself dedicated him as a 'A Devoted Son.'

There are many societal norms included in the story. For example, Rakesh bows down to touch his father's feet, people from the society come to the house of Rakesh to congratulate him with gifts, celebration in family with delicious foods, slap on the back of Rakesh for congratulations, embrace among brothers and sisters, marrying the girl chosen by mother, Rakesh taking care of whole family, care of mother-sits pressing her feet at the last moment, care of father-diet to medicine etc. These activities performed by different characters in the story seem very simple and informal but these are the same societal norms, which help to run the family and society in a smooth way. These are the expected behaviors from society. These societal norms help to maintain harmony among the people of society.

Review of Literature

This story *A Devoted Son* is one of the stories from the collection book *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*. Many critics have analyzed the collection of storybooks rather than individual stories. They have dealt with the text with thematic and character analysis. This section includes Bliss et al., Milnoli Salgado, Elaine Yee Lin Ho, Neeru Tandon, and Charles R Larson for exploring their ideas about the writing of Desai and her text.

Some of the critics have observed the works of Desai from the feminist perspective also. However, when once Desai was asked in an interview if she was a feminist she said, "NO, because when I started writing I wasn't even aware of such a concept as feminism. And I don't have much patience with the theory that it's women who suffer. As far as I can see, men suffer equally" (Bliss et al. 524). She is clear about her perspective that as a writer taking side of any particular ideology can make the writing partial.

Another critic Salgado observes the *Games at Twilight and other stories* from the characters' perspectives and says, "But, as the very title of the collection, *Games at Twilight*, suggests, the stories describe potential and partial illumination. Desai conveys this sense of partial illumination by yoking a character's renewed awareness to the twilight hours" (104). Desai picks typical characters in her story so that it can relate to the common Indian society. Writer's characterization in the text is simple but the theme blended with the characters is so strong. Salgado further says, "By creating a disjunction between truth and the absolution of spiritual insight, between meaning and its individual interpretation, Desai seems to be contend that all truths, including those that are founded upon epiphanic experience, are partial, personal and plural" (107). Desai portrays the reality of society through her literary creation, for this, she chooses realistic characters to give justice to the theme of writing.

The issues that Desai writes about are her surroundings. She watches society with her inner eyes and makes her literary works realistic. She feels good to write about Indian society and the same matters of society become the issues of her writing. Ho finds such things in the writing of Desai and says: "Through gardens and streets, homes and ashrams, and from cities to remote villages, the sea to the mountains, Desai locates each site through realistic details of flora and fauna, making them known as natural environments while weaving into her description symbolic perspectives on her human subjects and their perplexed lives" (2). The collection of *Story Games at Twilight and other stories* includes eleven stories with different themes and characterization. Desai has tried to give varieties of Indian insight through these stories. Ho further adds, "Each of the eleven stories collected in *Games at Twilight* (1978) marks the time of its occurrence, but they are also ahistorical in that they cannot readily be referred to a chronology, and even less to specific events, of contemporary India" (3). The stories are not in historical chronology, the major concern of Desai is to depict the Indian community through her stories. She wants to give the readers of her stories realistic tests. Ho even observes the characterization of the two particular stories and further says, "Two stories, 'A Devoted Son' and 'Surface Textures', are about characters whose views and actions are closely observed by the other characters, members of their family and immediate community, but whose motivations and interiority remain undisclosed" (6). Most of the characters found in the texts of Desai are common people who perform their roles in a natural way of living and this very thing is the major concern for the writer.

Thematic aspect of writing is clear for Desai. She wants to draw the scenario of Indian society and make the reader feel the originality of that society. Tandon has seen the thematic aspects of Desai's writing and says, "She has tried to present her themes organically with appropriate adjustment and adaptation in spheres of style and point of view" (94). Desai does not create her short stories with fancy. Her main concern is related to Indian society so she gets her matters of writing from there. Tandon says:

Anita Desai's first collection of short stories *Games at Twilight* was published in 1978. She has shown her craftsmanship even in the shorter fiction like short stories. Her short stories which are witty, evocative, tender and perceptive reveal her skill and dexterity in handling this genre. She sincerely uses all her creative techniques and talents in her short stories too. The reason is clear as she works with the same material as in the novels but on a small scale. In her short stories she has taken up themes like the tension between convention and exploration, family, solidarity and individualism, social requirements and the impersonal factors like death and art. In these stories, one finds the colour, smells and sounds of India. (79)

As a rational being of society, Desai seeks some problems from society and

blending those issues with her writing she tries to provide knowledge and awareness to the people. Each of her short stories has a particular message to the readers. Larson says:

After Yuan-Tsung Chen, the events and inner struggles the concern the characters in Anita Desai's new volume of short stories, *Games at Twilight* (Harper & Row, \$9.95), seem quite pale and insignificant. Most of the eleven stories the volume by this highly-praised Indian novelist share a kind of quiet madness or frenzy, as the characters she describes encounter moments of private truth about their worldly goals:[...]The incidents Desai describes are more often vignettes than plotted stories, yet her characters share a kind of obsessive quality about life and a terrifying realness in their commonality. (57)

Desai's short stories are full of natural elements. She picks the natural society, makes the characters from the same society, themes of her writing also deal with societal issues. She prefers writing about typical characters and tries to depict realism through those characters. Sometimes her characters suffer and try to convey the message that suffering is also a part of life. Some characters of her stories seem as if they are role models for other people of society, in this way Desai tries to impress the truth and reality to her readers.

Many critics have their own perspectives and interpretations to the short stories of Desai. Some of them have observed the characterization; some are dealing their insights with thematic aspects. These existing interpretations and critical analysis are insufficient to deal with the issue of societal norms depicted in her short stories. As Desai writes, about society, it is important to observe her writing from the perspective of norms and values existing in Indian society. She has included many societal norms in her short story *A Devoted Son* through which she wants to make people conscious about harmonious existence in society.

Methodology

This research paper wants to see the depicted societal norms in the short story entitled *A Devoted Son* of Anita Desai. Major character of the story Rakesh follows societal norms and makes his life easy. He is a well-educated person of his society but he does not hesitate to follow societal norms. He thinks societal norms are made to maintain harmony in family and society. Through this character Desai wants to convey the message to all the people living in society to be humble, respectful and loving to each other. To explore the same theme in this story I have seen this text from Marvin Harris's cultural materialism theoretical perspective. His book *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* is taken as a reference. According to him beliefs and cultural practices are determined by human behaviors and material conditions. Harries argues:

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY of human social life must concern itself equally with two radically different kinds of phenomena. On the one hand, there are the activities that constitute the human behavior stream - all the body motions and environmental effects produced by such motions and environmental effects produced by such motions, large and small, of all the human beings who have ever lived. On the other hand, there are all the thoughts and feelings that we human beings experience within our minds. (31)

Similarly, I have adopted the close reading of the text for thematic interpretation. Journal articles of Cristina Bicchieri et al., Adrienne Chung and Rajiv N. Rimal, S. Nageeb Ali and Roland Benabou, David C. Bell and Mary L. Cox, Luigi Guiso et al., and Eric Posner are consulted to support my theme.

Desai's *A Devoted Son* and Societal Norms

Desai's story *A Devoted Son* depicts the societal norms of Indian society. She has not created this story only for the particular society; the purpose of this story creation is to educate people all over society about the importance of societal norms. "Beliefs, expectations, group knowledge and common knowledge have thus become central concepts in the development of a philosophical view of social norms" (Bicchieri et al. 1). Societal norms are the identity of people and these are moral duties to perform. Societal norms are in unwritten forms and they are expected to be followed by all the members of society. When people follow societal norms within their society there is a low chance of conflict in family and society. For happy and peaceful survival in society, obeying societal norms is the perquisite. This story revolves around the same theme of obeying societal norms. When Rakesh, the main character, tops the medical exam and gets "first in the county" (70), he goes to share this news to his father Varmaji. This good news spreads in his society; many people come to the house of Rakesh to congratulate in his success. The joyful environment leads in the family and society of the village. That is just the beginning of his success, later the thesis, which he wrote for M.D., gives him another great opportunity of scholarship to study in the USA. Rakesh gets good opportunities of working in America but returns back to his own village. He marries the uneducated girl of his mother's choice and runs the family smoothly. He works in a city hospital as director, later opens own clinic and becomes the richest doctor in town. Time moves at its own pace; his parents get older, mother dies. His father also gets weak and ill. As a devoted son, he takes care of his father's food and medicine. He works for the maximum comfort of his father and wants his recovery but old Varmaji is not satisfied with the food restriction of his son and gets angry. He desires to have sweet foods but his son does not allow it. Rakesh as a doctor knows the consequences of these types of food to the elderly people and restricts his father more and provides only the necessary foods and medicines but his father is

dissatisfied with it and talks about it with another old man from society, Bhatia. Rakesh's father always complains about the things provided for his benefit and always gets angry at his son but as a devoted son he always cares for his father and wants his longevity. However, his father begs Rakesh to die soon.

Though the story shows a bit of a conflicting situation between Rakesh and his father at last, it was due to misunderstanding of the old man, Varmaji. He just wants to fulfill the desire of having sweet, oily and delicious food but as a doctor, Rakesh restricts these foods to his father. He loves his father and cares for him the most. He respects his father as a societal norm. At the very first scene, the story tells: "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" (70).

Among many societal norms, respecting elders and parents is the most prominent in Indian culture. Mother and father are regarded as God in Hindu religion. They give birth to offspring and look after their good upbringing. They are always worried about the future of their children and always want a better future so they invest their maximum time and earning to them. In this regard, parents are respectable in every society. Rakesh goes first to meet his father to share the news of his success and bows down to touch his father's feet. This respect towards his father is the societal norms of his society. As an obedient son, he fulfills his moral duty in family and even in society.

Society and neighborhood are the surroundings of survival where a person as a member of society learns many things in his life. Posner says, "...social norms are complex, poorly understood, and sensitive to factors that are difficult to control. Although social norms are constantly changing as a result of decentralized, undirected interactions, the only way for individuals to self-consciously change them in a direction they seek is to violate them" (8). All the people learn societal norms and moral values from the same society and they follow those values as moral rules in society, which keeps the bond between the community members. When Rakesh gets success in his exam, this news spreads all over his community, people from the community come to congratulate him. Desai writes: "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" (70). The community becomes happy if anyone from their community gets success; they also celebrate that happiness which is also considered as societal norms. It is the collective nature of society to congratulate a person in his success for the encouragement and Rakesh gets warm congratulations from his society.

Motherland feels like heaven to everyone. Nobody wants to leave his country without any reason. Rakesh gets a scholarship to study in The USA and goes there. He gets a golden opportunity to work there in prestigious hospitals but

he does not stay there and returns back to his own village. Yet, He has not forgotten his societal norms. Story further says, "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" (72). Embracing each other is like greeting in Indian culture. When they meet after a long, they follow this societal norm. Here, again Rakesh shows his respect to his father. Due to love towards motherland, he returns own country, which is considered greater than the societal norms.

Mother of Rakesh was not expecting the marriage of Rakesh in America but the neighbors were. They used to say that Rakesh will come with foreign wife but as a loving son of mother, he wants to marry the girl of his mother's choice. The story goes:

Instead he agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girls he had picked out for him in her own village, the daughter of a childhood friend, a plump and uneducated girl, it was true, but so old-fashioned, so placid, so complacent 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. (72)

Among varieties of marriage, arranged marriage is mostly preferred in society. It is practiced in the village area. This is also taken as societal norms for the adults of society. If the adults of marrying age agree to marry with the choice of parents, they are seen as the obedient son and daughter of their parents in society. "Informal institutions, which we will refer to as culture, comprise societal values (which affects intrinsic motivations) and social norms. In primitive and simple societies, where personal ties and ostracism are enough to enforce cooperation, culture is the only mechanism" (Guiso et al. 336). Rakesh agrees to marry the girl of his mother's choice without uttering any words of denial. In this sense, Rakesh seems interested in following all the societal norms.

Time passes with the happy moments in Rakesh's family. Later, the mother of Rakesh dies. She dies happily because her son Rakesh had cared during her last days in a proper way. Story tells, "..... .with a sight that sounded positively happy, for it was her own son who ministered to her in her last illness and who sat pressing her feet at the last moment -such a son as few women had borne" (73). Rakesh as a doctor and as a devoted son cares for his mother with his maximum efforts. He tries his best to give comfort to his mother during her last days. The presence of Rakesh every time nearby until the last breath makes his mother happy and she leaves this world satisfied with the service of her son. Care of elderly and sick parents is another societal norm which exists in most of the society. Rakesh as a devoted son plays his role perfectly.

Rakesh knows how to maintain harmony among the family, friends, and society. He is conscious of what should be his role and responsibilities as a doctor to

his patients. He equally manages his behavior not to dissatisfy anyone. Desai writes:

... .. that Rakesh was not only a devoted son and a miraculously good-natured man who contrived somehow to obey his parents and humor his wife and show concern equally for his children and his parents, but there was actually a brain inside this beautifully polished and formed body of good manners and kind nature and, in between ministering to his family and playing host to many friends and coaxing them all into feeling happy and grateful and content, he had actually trained his hands as well and emerged an excellent doctor, a really fine surgeon. (73)

Educated people from society are more conscious about societal norms. They consciously try to follow them for their own benefit and for the betterment of society. "Sociologists conceptualize norms as rules of behavior that exist at both the formal and informal levels - informal norms are considered more salient and reinforced" (Chung and Rimal 5). Desai presents Rakesh as an exemplary figure for following societal norms. She tries to give inspiration through the main character to the new generation about the positive aspects of following societal norms. Single people should play different roles in society. Role played by the family differs from society. Similarly, responsibilities performed as a friend differs from the professional duty of a doctor. Rakesh fits in each role; he consciously maintains every relations of society and runs his life easily and smoothly.

When Varmaji, the father of Rakesh becomes alone, weak and ill with mysterious disease again Rakesh plays the role of devoted son to comfort his father. He brings morning tea to his father in his father's favorite brass tumbler, sits at the edge of his father's bed and reads morning news for his father. He takes his father for evening air out in the garden, arranges a comfortable bed for him and helps father to go down the steps and onto the bed (74-75). Rakesh cares for his father every moment as much as possible. He wants the longevity of his father and wants to provide him comfort. He plays the role of devoted son as well as of experienced doctor. Care of father's diet to medicine proves him a dutiful son. He knows the societal norms of society because those norms are automatically adopted from his society.

Veena, the wife of Rakesh also plays an important role in caring for her family. She looks after her children to father-in-law. Preparing food of their choice to other necessities are her responsibilities. As an obedient wife, she follows the order of her husband and prepares food for her father in law according to the suggestion of Rakesh. Happiness of a family is the happiness of Venna, so she helps her husband to create a favorable environment in the family for each member. She too respects and cares for her father-in-law.

When the father of Rakesh dissatisfied with the restriction of his son to his desired food; he shares this with his elderly neighbor Bhatiya. They are the elderly people of the same community; whatever they feel they talk with each other. This

type of sharing of things with each other is also considered as societal norms. "The interaction between social norms and social learning faces institution designers with a tradeoff " (Ali and Benabou 146). People in the community make friends of the same age group to share things with each other because it helps to understand each other's feelings.

Desai critically observes her society and knits the realistic scenario to create her literary works. This Story, *A devoted son* is also one among them. In this story, she has picked up the very simple event of society but has made it broad with the theme of societal norms. "Social norms are often cited as the cause of many social phenomena, especially as an explanation for prosocial family and relationship behaviors" (Bell and Cox 28). Practices, which are followed for the betterment of the society and the people, are minutely analyzed through this story. The role of people living in society for maintaining a smooth run of society with mutual respect and harmony is the main thematic aspect of this story. Societal norms are made for each individual of society and they should follow it. This is the clear message of the writer through this story. New generation is disobeying the societal rules in the name of the modern era, it has hampered the maintenance of the cultural and societal values in society and in this sense, this story is targeted to raise awareness to the new generation. Similarly, the writer has enlisted the societal norms in her story to keep it on record for the coming generation too.

Conclusion

Desai prefers to create her literary works in a common Indian background. She observes her society, collects some insights from particular incidents and produces them as her text with unique and realistic themes. *A devoted son*, the short story also follows the same formula of the writer. She has picked very simple events from the middle-class family of an Indian village but inclusion of societal norms within the story has made it rich in thematic aspect. A boy born in a lower middle-class Indian village becomes the role model for his whole community is presented very wisely in this story. Rakesh, the boy from Indian village tops his medical exam, the thesis written for MD gives him scholarship and leads him to America for further study but the major thing which is raised in the story is he never forgets his society and the societal norms of his village. He gets back to his own village after completing his education and becomes an exemplary figure to all the members of society. His devotion to his parents, care to all of his family members, and mutual bond with friends and community members make him a respectable person. He leads his daily activities and the responsibilities towards family and society side by side. Through this story, the writer wants to see her society as cultured and civilized. She expects the same from the society of all over the world.

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