

Analyzing Filial Loyalty in Anita Desai's "A Devoted Son" Abhimanyu Humagain¹

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Abstract

Filial loyalty is central to comprehending parent-child relationships in contemporary Indian family narratives. The objective of the study is to analyze filial loyalty in the story "A Devoted Son" by Anita Desai. It adopted a qualitative textual analysis research design in which the primary data were drawn from selected excerpts of the story, while secondary data were collected from relevant books and journal articles. A comprehensive review of secondary data was conducted to support and contextualize the findings. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the excerpts as data and identify patterns in the depiction of filial loyalty. The findings revealed Rakesh's unwavering filial loyalty as one of the most prominent themes in the story. This study suggests that filial relationships in literature can provide insights into cultural expectations and emotional dynamics within families.

Keywords: Filial loyalty, Anita Desai, parent-child relationship, thematic analysis, a devoted son

1. Introduction

Human relationships, particularly those between parents and children, are shaped by a complex interplay of duty, love, and societal expectations (Ambert, 2020). Literature often reflects these dynamics, portraying how filial loyalty influences family life and individual choices (Kyeong et al., 2025)

The present study focuses on two interrelated units: filial loyalty, which refers to a child's obedience, respect, and devotion to parents. By analyzing these units, the study seeks to reveal the intricate balance between care, obedience, and autonomy in Indian familial contexts as depicted in the story.

This study is significant for its social and cultural impact, as it sheds light on traditional expectations in parent-child relationships and how these affect emotional well-being and interpersonal dynamics within families.

The objective of this research is to analyze how filial loyalty is represented in Anita Desai's "A Devoted Son". The anticipated benefit of this study is that the findings enhance understanding of parent-child relationships in literary and cultural contexts. Furthermore, it

informs readers, educators, and researchers about the emotional dimensions of filial duty and its implications for family dynamics.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How is filial loyalty depicted through the actions, words, and behavior of Rakesh in Anita Desai's "A Devoted Son"?

The study addresses a research gap as limited scholarly work has explored the simultaneous presence of filial devotion in Anita Desai's narrative, and previous studies have not fully analyzed this theme in depth.

This research provides insights into the cultural and emotional dimensions of parent-child relationships as represented in literature. It helps educators, students, and literary researchers understand the complexities of filial loyalty and emotional conflict in Indian familial contexts.

2. Literature Review

Filial loyalty is a recurring theme in literature, particularly in narratives that explore parent-child relationships (Merz et al., 2010). This concept reflects duty, love, and individual desires, which shape personal choices and family dynamics. Understanding this theme helps readers and researchers examine the emotional and cultural expectations within familial structures. The purpose of this literature review is to explore existing scholarly work on filial loyalty, and parent-child relationships to contextualize the analysis of this story. This topic is important because it illuminates the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of family life, offering insights into the interplay between obedience, care, and autonomy.

2.1 Filial Loyalty

Filial loyalty, or the sense of duty and devotion a child shows toward parents, has been widely discussed in literary studies (Qi, 2015). Scholars argue that loyalty is often portrayed as obedience, respect, and the fulfillment of parental expectations (Leung et al., 202,). In Indian literature, filial loyalty is considered a moral and cultural virtue, frequently influencing a character's choices and life decisions (Kochuvilayil & Varma, 2025). In Anita Desai's "A Devoted Son", Rakesh exemplifies filial loyalty through his unwavering care, obedience, and reverence toward his parents, even when personal desires or convenience might suggest otherwise.

2.2 Anita Desai

Anita Desai is a novelist, short-story writer, and author of children's books (Pathania,2025). She was born in Mussoorie on 24th June, 1937, India, (Kumar, 2020) and studied at Delhi University (Singh,2025). She is the author of several novels, including "Fire on the Mountain", "Clear Light of Day", "In Custody". *etc.* She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her writing style blends lyrical prose with keen observation of characters' inner lives. Her contributions have significantly shaped modern Indian English literature.

2.3 Parent-Child Relationship

The parent-child relationship is a fundamental social and emotional bond that shapes an individual's development, behavior, and identity (Lamb & Lewis, 2013). It is built on love, care, guidance, and mutual understanding, where parents provide support, discipline, and values, while children offer affection and trust. A healthy relationship fosters emotional security, confidence, and moral growth, whereas conflict or neglect can lead to emotional and psychological challenges (Ashford & Miotto, 2025). This relationship evolves over time,

adapting to the child’s changing needs and independence, but remains a lifelong connection influencing attitudes, decisions, and well-being.

2.4 A Devoted Son

The short story “A Devoted Son” by Anita Desai explores the complex dynamics of the parent–child relationship through the character of Rakesh, a hardworking and obedient son who rises from a modest background to become a successful doctor (Pokharel, 2024; Undale, 2025). The narrative highlights his deep sense of duty and loyalty toward his father, Varma, especially in caring for him in old age. However, the story also reveals the tension between traditional expectations and personal desires, as the father gradually feels controlled and resentful of his son’s strict care. Through this emotional conflict, Desai portrays themes of filial devotion, sacrifice, authority, and the subtle shift from love to domination within family relationships (Kaur,2019).

2.5 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within data (Ahmed et al. 2025). It involves systematically coding data, organizing codes into meaningful categories, and developing themes that capture significant aspects of the research topic (Williams & Moser, 2019). This approach is flexible and can be applied across various disciplines, allowing researchers to explore participants’ experiences, perceptions, and meanings in depth. It helps in presenting rich, detailed, and organized findings, making it especially useful for studies based on interviews, texts, or documents (Christou, 2022).

3. Materials and Methods

The research was conducted using a qualitative textual research design. This design was considered appropriate because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of textual content to examine themes of filial loyalty. Secondary data were collected from books, journal articles, and other relevant scholarly sources. The method of collecting secondary data involved an extensive review of theoretical literature to provide contextual and conceptual support for the study. Primary data, in the form of selected excerpts from Anita Desai’s “A Devoted Son”, were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, examine, and interpret recurring patterns, ideas, and motifs related to filial loyalty in the story. Through this method, the study systematically highlighted the duty, and devotion within the parent-child relationship.

3.1 Thematic Analysis

Table 1: *Excerpts with the Theme of Respect and Obedience*

Excerpts	Code	Sub-Theme
Father asked Rakesh about his national examination result to get scholarship to study MBBS in the United States of America “A first division, son?” his father asked, beaming, reaching for the papers.	Modesty before father	Respect and Obedience
Rakesh’s father told his neighbor about Rakesh “Yes, and do you know what is the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning? He came and touched my feet. He bowed down and touched my feet.”	Showing respect and obedience	Respect and Obedience

The narrator mentioned “Rakesh agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl his mother had picked out for him in her own village, the daughter of a childhood friend, a plump and uneducated girl.”	Obeying mother’s choice	Respect and Obedience
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The selected excerpts from *A Devoted Son* by Anita Desai consistently construct the major theme of filial loyalty through culturally rooted behaviors of respect, obedience, and humility. Each code and its corresponding sub-theme reinforce how Rakesh’s identity is shaped by deep devotion to parental authority. In the first excerpt, where the father anxiously asks, “*A first division, son?*”, Rakesh’s response “*At the top of the list, papa*”—is marked by restraint and humility. The code “Modesty before father” reflects his deliberate avoidance of pride despite outstanding achievement. This aligns with the sub-theme “Respect and Obedience,” as Rakesh prioritizes honoring his father over self-celebration. His modesty is not merely personal but culturally conditioned, demonstrating that filial loyalty involves emotional discipline and deference.

In the second excerpt, the father proudly recounts how Rakesh “*came and touched my feet.*” The code “Showing respect and obedience” directly signifies a traditional gesture of reverence in South Asian culture. This act reinforces the sub-theme “Respect and Obedience” by illustrating how physical expressions of respect symbolize deeper emotional loyalty. Rakesh’s immediate gesture after success highlights that his achievements are subordinated to familial reverence, strengthening the portrayal of filial devotion.

In the third excerpt, Rakesh’s agreement to marry a girl chosen by his mother is captured in the code “Obeying mother’s choice.” This reflects his willingness to subordinate personal preference to parental authority. The sub-theme “Respect and Obedience” is again reinforced, as marriage—a deeply personal decision—is treated as a familial duty. This obedience underscores that filial loyalty in the story extends beyond gestures and words into life-altering commitments.

These excerpts collectively demonstrate that filial loyalty is constructed through repeated patterns of humility, ritual respect, and unquestioning obedience (Delkeskamp-Hayes, 2012). The sub-theme “Respect and Obedience” serves as a foundational dimension of this major theme, revealing that Rakesh’s devotion is not situational but deeply ingrained in his values and actions.

Table 2: *Excerpts with the Theme of Sacrifice and Compliance*

Excerpt	Code	Sub-theme
Rakesh told his father about his national examination result “At the top of the list, papa,” Rakesh murmured, as if awed. “First in the country.”	Dedication of achievement to father	Sacrifice and Compliance
The narrator asserted “Rakesh agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl his mother had picked out for him in her own village, the daughter of a childhood friend, a plump and uneducated girl.”	Sacrificing personal preference	Sacrifice and Compliance

The given excerpts from *A Devoted Son* by Anita Desai deepen the major theme of filial loyalty by foregrounding the sub-theme “sacrifice and compliance.” Through the selected codes, Rakesh is portrayed as a son who consistently subordinates his personal desires and achievements to fulfill parental expectations. In the first excerpt, “*At the top of the list, papa,*”

Rakesh murmured, as if awed. “First in the country,” the code “dedication of achievement to father” reflects how Rakesh frames his extraordinary success not as an individual triumph but as something to be shared with—and implicitly offered to—his father. His subdued tone (“murmured, as if awed”) suggests that he internalizes his success as a familial accomplishment rather than a personal one. This aligns with the sub-theme “sacrifice and compliance,” as Rakesh symbolically relinquishes ownership of his achievement, demonstrating that filial loyalty involves emotional sacrifice and the redirection of personal glory toward parental pride. In the second excerpt, where “Rakesh agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl his mother had picked out,” the code “sacrificing personal preference” highlights a more tangible and life-altering form of compliance. Marriage, a deeply personal choice, is accepted without resistance, indicating Rakesh’s willingness to suppress his own desires. This directly reinforces the sub-theme “sacrifice and compliance,” as his obedience goes beyond respect into the realm of self-denial. His acceptance is not negotiated but immediate, illustrating how filial loyalty in the narrative demands unquestioning adherence to parental authority. Together, these excerpts reveal that filial loyalty in the story is not limited to respect and obedience but extends into profound personal sacrifice (Kochuvilayil & Varma, 2025). The sub-theme “sacrifice and compliance” shows that Rakesh’s devotion is expressed through both symbolic acts (dedicating success) and concrete decisions (accepting an arranged marriage), emphasizing that true filial loyalty, in this context, requires the surrender of individual autonomy for the sake of familial duty.

Table 3: *Excerpts with the Theme of Affectionate Care and Responsibility*

Excerpt	Code	Sub-Theme
Rakesh told his father “Papa,” his son said, tenderly, sitting down on the edge of the bed and reaching out to press his feet.	Tender address to father	Affectionate Care and Responsibility
Rakesh told his father after he came from the hospital “Papa, I’m home.”	Expressing emotional attachment	Affectionate Care and Responsibility
Rakesh told his father after he came from the hospital “How are you feeling, papa?”	Ensuring father’s well-being	Affectionate Care and Responsibility
Rakesh told his father when his father said he liked to die “Papa, you’re joking,” his son smiled at him, lovingly. “I’ve brought you a new tonic to make you feel better. You must take it, it will make you feel stronger again. Here it is. Promise me you will take it regularly, papa.”	Providing care and medicine / Persistent caregiving	Affectionate Care and Responsibility
Rakesh told his father “I’ve brought you a new tonic... Promise me you will take it regularly, papa.”	Son as a protector	Affectionate Care and Responsibility

The selected excerpts from *A Devoted Son* by Anita Desai significantly develop the major theme of filial loyalty through the sub-theme “affectionate care and responsibility.” Unlike earlier instances of obedience and sacrifice, these moments foreground the emotional

and caregiving dimension of Rakesh’s devotion, showing how filial loyalty evolves into active responsibility for a parent’s well-being.

In the first excerpt, *“Papa,” his son said, tenderly... reaching out to press his feet,*” the code “tender address to father” highlights the warmth and intimacy in Rakesh’s behavior. The affectionate tone and physical gesture convey not just respect but emotional closeness. This aligns with the sub-theme “affectionate care and responsibility,” suggesting that filial loyalty is expressed through gentle, compassionate interaction, reinforcing the emotional bond between father and son.

In the second excerpt, *“Papa, I’m home,”* the code “expressing emotional attachment” emphasizes Rakesh’s desire to immediately connect with his father upon returning. This simple yet meaningful statement reflects his sense of belonging and duty. The sub-theme is reinforced as his first concern is not himself but his father, indicating that filial loyalty includes consistent emotional presence and attachment.

In the third excerpt, *“How are you feeling, papa?”*, the code “ensuring father’s well-being” shows Rakesh’s attentiveness to his father’s health. This question reflects a shift from passive respect to active concern. Under the sub-theme “affectionate care and responsibility,” this illustrates that filial loyalty requires vigilance and continuous care, especially when the parent becomes vulnerable.

In the fourth excerpt, where Rakesh responds to his father’s wish to die by offering medicine and reassurance—*“I’ve brought you a new tonic.. Promise me you will take it regularly, papa”*—the code “providing care and medicine / persistent caregiving” captures his role as a dedicated caregiver. His insistence and loving tone reveal both professional responsibility as a doctor and personal devotion as a son. The sub-theme is strongly reinforced here, as filial loyalty is enacted through persistent efforts to preserve his father’s life.

Finally, the repeated assurance *“I’ve brought you a new tonic... Promise me you will take it regularly, papa”*—under the code “son as a protector” positions Rakesh as a guardian figure. This reflects a role reversal where the son assumes authority for the father’s well-being. Within the sub-theme “affectionate care and responsibility,” this demonstrates that filial loyalty matures into protective responsibility, where care may even become directive.

These excerpts collectively show that filial loyalty is not only about obedience or sacrifice but also about deep emotional care and sustained responsibility (Zhang et al., 2021). The sub-theme “affectionate care and responsibility” reveals that Rakesh’s devotion is expressed through love, concern, and active caregiving, ultimately portraying filial loyalty as a holistic commitment encompassing both emotional and practical dimensions.

Table 3: *Sub-Themes Contributing to a Major Theme*

Sub-Theme	Major Theme
Respect and Obedience	Filial Loyalty
Sacrifice and Compliance	
Affectionate Care and Responsibility	

In *A Devoted Son* by Anita Desai, the major theme of filial loyalty is constructed through three interrelated sub-themes: respect and obedience, sacrifice and compliance, and affectionate care and responsibility. Each sub-theme represents a distinct yet complementary dimension of Rakesh’s devotion to his parents.

This sub-theme forms the cultural and moral foundation of filial loyalty. Rakesh consistently demonstrates humility, reverence, and submission to parental authority—whether by speaking modestly about his achievements, performing traditional gestures like touching his father’s feet, or accepting parental decisions without resistance. These acts show that filial

loyalty begins with recognizing and honoring the authority and dignity of parents. Thus, respect and obedience serve as the initial expression of filial devotion.

This sub-theme deepens filial loyalty by highlighting Rakesh's willingness to subordinate his personal desires and autonomy. His agreement to an arranged marriage and his tendency to dedicate his achievements to his parents illustrate how he sacrifices individual preference for familial expectations. Filial loyalty here is not passive but demanding, requiring self-denial and unquestioned compliance. This dimension reveals that true devotion, in the story's cultural context, involves placing family above self.

This sub-theme represents the emotional and practical culmination of filial loyalty. As Rakesh's father ages and becomes dependent, Rakesh assumes the role of caregiver—expressing love, concern, and responsibility for his father's well-being. His attentive questions, tender tone, and persistent medical care demonstrate that filial loyalty evolves into active service and protection. It is not limited to duty but enriched by affection and sustained commitment.

Together, these sub-themes illustrate that filial loyalty in the story is a multidimensional construct: it begins with respect, intensifies through sacrifice, and matures into compassionate responsibility (Chan, et al., 2012; Zhang, 2025). Anita Desai portrays filial loyalty not merely as a virtue but as a way of life that governs thought, emotion, and action (Kaur, 2019). The interplay of these sub-themes reveals both the strength and the complexity of such devotion, suggesting that while filial loyalty fosters deep familial bonds, it may also demand significant personal compromise.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to explore filial loyalty in Anita Desai's "A Devoted Son". The findings reveal that filial loyalty is a central theme shaping the parent-child relationship, often leading to emotional tension when individual desires conflict with familial duties. Rakesh's devotion to his parents demonstrates both care and control, highlighting the complex interplay between duty and personal autonomy. The emotional conflict experienced by both father and son reflects the psychological and cultural pressures inherent in Indian family structures. These findings indicate that literature can serve as a valuable lens to understand the ethical, emotional, and social dimensions of familial relationships. They also show that studying such narratives helps illuminate broader cultural norms and moral expectations in society. Ultimately, examining these themes enhances our understanding of human relationships and cultural values through literary expression. Future studies should explore filial loyalty in other stories through comparative, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary approaches to better understand its evolving meanings in different social and cultural contexts.

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