

CHAPTER V

STORIES OF PROFESSIONALS

Two stories from the collection Games at Twilight and other stories can be called stories of professionals. They are "A Devoted Son" and "The Farewell Party". The two stories are both touching and have comic aspects too and reveal human weaknesses.

In the first story "A Devoted Son" Anita Desai deals with a middle class family in the urban milieu. The central character is Rakesh. The title shows the nature of Rakesh, who is a devoted son of one Mr. Verma. In the first half of the story, the author focuses on Rakesh's character. But there is a shift in the narration and the story continues from Verma's point of view. Anita Desai gives a beautiful portrait of old Mr. Verma in the last half of the story.

In the beginning of the story, Anita Desai depicts the character of Rakesh. He belongs to a middle class family. The setting is the small house in the shabby little colony at the edge of the city and happy atmosphere in Rakesh's house. In the beginning, we are given to understanding that Rakesh is an absolutely devoted son. He fulfils the demands of his father. In spite of his achievements he remains humble and devoted to his family.

The party is arranged to celebrate the success of Rakesh in the medical examination. Rakesh finds his name at the "top of the list" in the morning news paper and comes home. The first thing that he does is that he bows down and touches his father's feet. This shows the obedient nature of Rakesh. It becomes the matter of pride for Verma. On this happy occasion many visitors come to congratulate parents on this Wunderkind. There is

happiness everywhere in the family. The yellow house is surrounded by a garden and filled with the sounds and colours of a festival. The family overflows with great joy. The visitors come with garlands, halwa, party clothes and gifts, fountain pens, even one or two watches. All are joyful and all in a "multicoloured whirl of pride and great shining vistas newly opened".

Rakesh's success is a great matter for the family because, he is the first son in the family to receive an education. The family has sacrificed a lot for sending him to school and even to medical college. Rakesh, a devoted son gives the fruit of success to the family. The sincere and obedient nature of Rakesh wins the minds not only of his parents but also the neighbours. They feel proud of an "exemplary filial behaviour" of Rakesh. They think, his success is a great reward to his family because, he is a son of an ordinary man who has come from vegetable seller's family. They celebrate his success distributing sweets and betel leaves and thus the whole day they "whoop" and "dance" with joy and happiness.

The path of success is open to Rakesh. Every thing falls in line where his life is concerned. He writes a thesis for his M.D. and this brings him a greater glory. His success reaches the heights of fame and fortune. He wins a scholarship and goes to America, which makes his family to say "the U.S.A." with grand familiarity. He starts his career in one of the most prestigious hospitals and also gets the appreciation from his American colleagues. All wonder when he returns to his little house in the Shabby colony which is described as follows:

*... 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 .<sup>1</sup>*

The above described Shabby colony still attracts Rakesh who return from America. His dignity, his success does not forbid him to come back to this Shabby colony. He is not blind with his name and fame. He remains obedient to his parents. When he comes home the first thing he does is, he embraces his sisters and brothers and bows down to touch his father's feet which indicates that Rakesh is not changed. Another strange fact according to his mother about Rakesh is, that he has not brought a foreign wife, about which her neighbours have warned. Rakesh marries an uneducated village girl whom his mother chooses and becomes father of a son. Thus, Rakesh succeeds in every walk of his life and fulfils their wishes, bringing great satisfaction to them.

For some years Rakesh works in the city hospital and quickly reaches the top of the administrative organization and he becomes a director. Thus, Rakesh shines not only as the best but also the richest doctor in town. Rakesh has dedicated his whole life for this achievement. His success, his honour, his achievement, his obedience make the unsuccessful and rancorous neighbours to admire him for bearing the qualities described as follows:

*Rakesh was not only a devoted son and miraculously good natured man who contrived some how to obey his parents and humour his wife and show concern equally for his children and patients 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.<sup>2</sup>*

The whole passage sums up his character and adds to the wonder of his neighbours who feel that how one man -- a man born to "illiterate" parents has "achieved", "combined" and "conducted" such virtues which acknowledge his talent and skill.

But life is not always happy. The success, honour, glory are all temporary. Till now Rakesh experiences only the happy and prosperous side of life. But his life now turns to other, darker side. His father grows old and retires from his post at the kerosene dealer's depot at which he has worked for forty years. Before he set up his own clinic his mother dies. And thus, slowly his name and fame starts diluting.

In the last part of the story the focus is on Verma's character. Anita Desai depicts the portrait of old Verma with minute details and captures his psychology and reveals his inner mind. It is full of irony. Once proud father, now irritated and annoyed with his son. He has to obey his so called devotion. He realizes that he is simply a patient of his son. Verma grows old, retires from his job and also loses his wife. All these result in his illness which even his son finds it difficult to diagnose.

There is a reversal of role in Verma's case, Verma is reduced to the role of a child. He feels himself to be a prisoner kept under strict surveillance. As a devoted son, Rakesh does not fail in his duty towards his father. He takes much care of him. He gives him his morning tea, reads

out the newspaper discusses with him and in the evening, takes him out of his room to the beautifully arranged garden. In spite of all this which gratifies old Verma, one thing makes him very unhappy, that is, Rakesh "supervises his father's diet"<sup>3</sup> Verma longs to eat, drink but his son forbids all these things in order to prolong his life. This seems little ironic because the old man wants to die but the young son wants to prolong his life.

Being a doctor, Rakesh keeps a close watch on his father. Verma is made to eat meals twice a day -- containing dry bread, boiled lentils, boiled vegetables and sometimes a bit of chicken or fish, that too boiled. He is forced to take pills, though he begs to let him free. This strict schedule makes Verma so upset that he prefers to die. Amidst this only one pleasure is left to Verma, that is, visits of his neighbours before whom he expresses his feelings. He complains about his son before them like this:

*'He does not even give me enough to eat'... He weighs the food he gives me -- he has scales to weigh it on. That is what it has come to .<sup>4</sup>*

This shows Verma's hard, harsh and stubborn nature and this is the effect of old age. This also shows that there is no place for devotion of the 'emotional variety'.

The glory of Rakesh undergoes a curious 'sea change'. The interpretation alters. His masterly efficiency is nothing but coldheartedness, his authority is only "tyranny in disguise". Old Verma lying on his string bed is fed up with this kind of life. He complains of a pain and even a vague, grey fear in the night. He is so tired of taking medicines that really he breaks the bottle of medicine. Still, his son forces him to take medicine saying that "I have my duty to you, Papa'..."<sup>5</sup> which shows that duty overtakes devotion at this juncture.

Anita Desai throws light on the mental suffering of Verma who wants to escape from this strict atmosphere in the house. He feels that everything is happening against him. The laugh of children, taunts of daughter-in-law, his son's meeting with his friends are all intolerable and affect his health so much that the regular pills, tonic, vitamins all prove useless. His miserable condition makes him cry sometimes with pain, "God is calling me -- and they won't let me go".<sup>6</sup>

When his health reaches the worst condition and brings him nearly to the state of death, Verma closes, points his chin at the ceiling and groans like prophet "God is calling me -- now let me go".<sup>7</sup> with this pathetic sentence the story ends. It shows the practical aspect of devotion demonstrated by Rakesh.

Thus, the story concentrates on the professionalism of the central character. Rakesh is a doctor first and doctor last. Even in his treatment of his own father, his attitude to his father is professional first, and filial second.

It is ironic that his professionalism should supersede his devotion even. The human aspect of his father's condition is totally ignored by the most 'devoted' son. Practically, Anita Desai points out here that the professional identity of human being obliterates the other human relationships in the name of efficiency and professionalism.

The same professional attitude is pointed out in the second story "The Farewell Party". It is a story of a middle class family again -- the Ramans. The title is named after the party which Ramans have arranged. The story takes place in Delhi and in the background of middle class urban milieu, Anita Desai depicts the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Raman.

The Ramans are giving the farewell party to their friends and neighbours on their departure from Delhi to Bombay. Mr. Raman is working as an executive in an Indian firm. Even this is considered a lower position, because it is not an international/multinational company. This reveals the colonial consciousness of the couple. The story is narrated on the level of irony and satire.

Anita Desai mainly focuses on the Raman's characters, and through other character tries to reveal the hypocrisy and insincerity of the bureaucrats in corporate institutions. It is Ramans who at last realize the hollowness of the social life. They realize people professing sincerity which they do not feel. There is the social grading, the distances, the snobbery and hypocrisy.

The story begins with the party atmosphere in Raman's house. It is arranged on the lawn in the evening of summer. The description of the party atmosphere is as follows:

*All the lights on the veranda, in the portico and indoors were on, like so many lanterns, richly copper and glowing, with extraordinary beauty... they did very little to light the lawn which was vast, a still lake of inky grass.*<sup>8</sup>

In this beautiful background of the party atmosphere, the Ramans are at the centre. Bina Raman is a "frigid" and "friendless" woman. Because, her life is blighted by a spastic child, whom she has been nursing for last fifteen years. This makes her to get involved deeply in the workings of the local hospital and with its many departments and doctors. Her care for this child is so intense and so desperate that her relationship with them is purely professional. She is absorbed in this so much that she has no life except the family and the hospital. She has no time to attend parties. She



has sad contempt towards the parties and this keeps her away from all jovial circles of mah-jong, bridge, coffee parties and club evenings.

The shock of their first child's birth has made Bina and her husband both "fanatic parents." They are not close with anybody. Bina, a tall, pale woman, heavy-boned and sallow, has a certain presence, a certain dignity and people who have heard of the spastic child, liked her and admired her.

The party is an occasion which reveals the hypocritical and snobbish side of the society. Everybody who comes to the party appear artificial. Their speech and their behaviour exhibit the hypocrisy on the one hand and their snobbery on the other. The party is full of men, women and children. They represent a cross-section of the high society. The women such as Mrs. Ramsay, a commissioner's wife and other "company wives" who represent various mercantile companies like Imperial, Tobacco, Brook Bond and Esso. Miss Dutta, the town busy-body, secretary and chairman of more committees is also one among them. They are all bureaucrats who talk about "social duties". But Bina is not aware of this. Therefore, they label her as 'queer', 'proud', 'boring' and 'difficult'. They fail to understand the feelings of Bina.

Anita Desai throws light on their attitudes which are really ironic. They all express a sense of loss on Raman's going away and even some of them force to stay on. The very expression of Mrs. Ramsay, who says:

*Why are you leaving us so soon, Mrs. Raman?...*  
*oh, I wish you were staying...<sup>9</sup>*

This speech of Mrs. Ramsay reveals her pretending nature. She pretends to be really very sorry for the Ramans, who have met her once or twice. Everybody in the party talks in a very pleasing manner. Mr. Bose, an employee of the local museum, talks in the fruity tone:

*How we all miss you at the next children's art competitions. You used to be my chief inspiration .<sup>10</sup>*

*Thus, the various speeches of the guests reveal their hypocrisy. They lack the real concern towards the Ramans. None of them considers their feelings towards the spastic child. It is not a vital factor for them. They always talk of clubs, parties but never try to understand Bina's feelings. Among them only Mrs. D'Souza, her daughter's teacher appears very simple and in her she finds an honest individuality. Bina finds others:*

*... beautifully dressed and praised babblers... being stamped all over by the plain rubber stamps of their husbands' companies...<sup>11</sup>*

This description indicates that all these women have no individuality. They are known only by their husbands' names and popularity. They lack self-identity.

Mr. Raman also realizes the hypocrisy among the men and he does not like to converse with his "motley assembly of guests". He does not enjoy the party but he can not wreck it. He serves the guests with varieties of drinks such as beer, Black Knight Whisky, Vatlog, brown sherry, and red Golconda wine, Remy Martin. All are in party mood and overflowed with drinks. Raman only listens the 'watery sound of speech' and 'liquid sound of drink' and finds that everyone has forgotten him. Nobody is aware of Raman. So, this makes Raman to place himself amongst the waiters. Thus, we find a typical irony, which the Ramans are aware.

The real irony is that the Ramans' family is an object of pity. Mr. Raman is a subordinate officer as it is; they have a pathetic child; and Mrs. Raman is tethered to her home and child. While the others are

showing them sympathy, outwardly, they are probably enjoying their superiority; their righteousness. The Ramans are conscious of this inwardly. The Ramans know that they are the 'out casts', because Roman is placed in one of the lower ranks of the companies' hierarchy. More than this, they have a spastic child. And like others, Ramans do not belong to the category of men who called their wives "darling" when in public. The Ramans realize their hypocrisy in each and every act.

The guests know that this is the last party and after that they will not meet the Ramans. They label it as 'farewell party'. Everyone behaves with intimacy. Meanwhile there come Ramans' neighbours, the three couples -- one couple is very young, another middle-aged and the third grand parents. They also pretend to be very sorry, like others, they too talk in a pleasing way. For instance, one of the neighbours expresses her feelings like this:

*Now that you are leaving, I can talk to you about it at last: did you know my Vinod is sweet on your Tara?... he said 'Mama, when I grow up I will marry Tara... What shall we do about that, eh?'.<sup>12</sup>*

*This shows how that woman wins her heart forever by her pleasant talk. But, the Ramans notice their little concern towards them. Thus, the Cinderella -- like friendliness pervades their party.*

There is a pattern here in the party. The tempo rises by the arrival of guests one by one and it falls where they depart one by one. We see the dissolution moment in the party with good-byes of the guests leaving the Ramans alone.

Anita Desai builds up moment of illumination by establishing an ascending series of moments of complication involving the highest emotional

response from reader and descending action which leads to crisis. When the old-new friends have left, the Ramans once again begin their party with doctors. They feel it is a true party. Because, they find in them the human aspect and the real concern. The doctors are not only their friends but they are almost a part of their self-defence. They are the closest to them in sympathy. They find in them the real, stable, human relation. The Ramans feel quite relaxed in their company. They sit down with the spastic child, Nono amongst them. The Ramans feel truly relaxed because the doctors share their feelings and show the real concern to them. Thus, the formal party of the Ramans ends with Tagore's sweetest and saddest songs:

*Father, the boat is carrying me away,  
 Father, it is carrying me away from home.*<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Bannerji's wife who sings the song in such a heartbroken tone that their eyes fill with tears that are compounded equally of 'drink', 'relief' and 'regret'. It ends with regret and sadness because of the reality which expresses the sincere and true human relationship.