The Village by the Sea: An Ecocritical Reading

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Ecocriticism is a conscious-raising phenomenon about environment. To the students or scholars of literature, ‘ecocriticism is a critical development to spread consciousness about ecological concerns. It is a multidisciplinary approach. Numberless development programmes are being executed not being with ecology instead at the cost of ecology. Ecocriticism as a literary ecological philosophy provides a reliable framework or mechanism to analyze cultural and literary texts which are directly/indirectly preoccupied with ecological concerns and contexts. Moreover it looks at the depictions of natural sights and landscapes along with people’s attitudes and attention towards nature; may be favorable or unfavorable. In fact this sort of attempt negotiates between literature and ecology.

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We look
But at the surfaces of things; we hear
Of towns in flames, fields ravaged, young and old
Driven out in troops to want and nakedness:
Then grasp our swords and rush upon a cure
That flatters us because it asks not though:
The deeper malady is better his,
The world is poisoned at the heart.

(The Borderers)

Today we live in a world of tropical warmth, chronic drought, desertification, deforestation, acidifying of oceans, frequent coastal inundation, tsunami, cyclones, increasing food and shelter shortage, accidents at nuclear power stations, oxytocin applied vegetables, industrial pollution, and many more lethal activities. It is most pressing need to keep our environment safe so that we can live and let other beings live and survive too. Environment affects and even largely determines all things ranging from food, fashion, technology to race, class, gender, sexuality, mentality, nationality, law, religion, economics etc. Eco-imbalance is not specific (one nation, one place, or one city) problem. It is a global phenomenon. Hence whole world unanimously whether partially or fully affected, should come forward and launch a global campaign with honesty for the service of environment and the restoration of healthy environment. In wake of global ecological crises and resultant life-threatening effects prompted literary thinkers to formulate an eco-oriented approach called ‘ecocriticism’. It came off as a new feather to the field of literary criticism. Today the world peace is threatened especially by our blind exploitation of nature. If racism was 20th century disease, ecological problem is 21st century trouble. We have several eco-philosophies and organizations for the sake of environment. Some of them are Deep Ecology, The Environment Justice Movement, Earth First!, Ecocriticism etc. These are solely intended “to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community. This is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature. The conceptual and
practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities - the human, the natural - can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere (Ruecker 1996:107).

Ecocriticism as a literary ecological philosophy provides a reliable framework or mechanism to analyze cultural and literary texts which are directly/indirectly preoccupied with ecological concerns and contexts. Moreover it looks at the depictions of natural sights and landscapes along with people’s attitudes and attention towards nature; may be favorable or unfavorable. In fact this sort of attempt negotiates between literature and ecology. Ecocriticism as a literary and cultural theory is burgeoning since 1990’s in Europe and America chiefly. However seeds were laid around four decades ago in Raymond Williams’ The Country and the City (1973) and Annette Kolodny’s The Lay of the Land (1975). Cheryll Glotfelty simply defines ‘ecocriticism’ as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... takes an earth centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty, 1996: xviii). However some critics attribute the birth of the term ‘ecocriticism’ to US critic William Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (1978). By ‘ecocriticism’ he means application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Bate, the first British ecocritic sees ‘ecocriticism’ double stranded approach. The first explores human attitudes towards nature; and the second, the relationship between man and nature depicted in various literary texts.

Since 1970s a need was continually being experienced to give due representation to ecology into literary studies. The result is ‘ecocriticism’. A number of equivalents to ‘ecocriticism’ can be suggested such as ‘ecopoetics’, ecological literature’, ecoliterature, ‘environmental literature’, ‘environmental literary criticism’, ‘green studies’, ‘green cultural studies’, ‘green literature’, ‘nature writing’ so on and so forth. As a literary field of study, it seeks to relate humans to non-human environment. Moreover it evaluates prevalent ideologies towards nature spread over literary and cultural texts. Ecocritics are so enthusiastic that they blur the line between human and non-human world. Like Wordsworth they see nature as living personality.

Ecocritics flamboyantly disapprove of the notion that non-human world is subordinate to human. Ecocritics view all literature in terms of place, setting or environment. Ecocriticism as a critical perspective looks at the relationship between human and extra-human world. Ecocritics not only worry about wild life and wilderness but also human health, food and shelter. Almost all human activities today are engaged in the blind exploitation of nature. Consequently he/she is enjoying the deadly dance of destruction without any complaint. Industrial pollution is the main threat along with destructive ways of consuming natural resources, such as excessive fishing and the ‘clear cut logging of forests’. (Kerridge 2006: 533). Ecocritics argue for sympathy towards both pet and non-pet animals.

Deep Ecology is the radical form of environmentalism conceived by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in early 70’s of 20th century, seeks to shift ‘anthropocentrism’ (human centered) into ‘ecocentrism’ (environment centered). ‘The Environmental Justice Movement’ refers to ‘the efforts of poor communities to defend themselves against the dumping of toxic waste, the harmful contamination of their air, food, and water, the loss of their lands and livelihoods, and the indifference of governments and corporations’. (Kerridge 2006: 533).
The novel *The Village by the Sea* (1982) by Anita Desai is set in the lush green surrounding of Thul, a village located by the Western coast of India. In this village ‘large or small, rich or poor, each had sacred basil plant growing in a pot by the front door.’ (p. 28). At its surface level, it is a story of Lila of thirteen and her brother Hari only of twelve who are left to themselves. They feel responsible for looking after their two younger sisters – Bela and Kamal, ailing mother, and drunkard father. But at the deeper level, it is more than a children novel. It is at least two stranded novel. If the struggle of Hari and Lila forms the main strand, the ‘environment justice movement’ of poor villagers of Thul, Rewas, Alibagh, etc. and few Bombay men shapes the second strand of the story. Like other novels, Anita Desai this time again didn’t forget conveying her message to the people and the government officials. It is a purposive novel. Both strands are interwoven perfectly. The novel in a sense contrasts Bombay city having filth and dirt with lush green aura of Thul village. Bombay city is designated in the novel as ‘cruel city’, ‘friendless city’, ‘city of dust and soot’. Moreover city people had poor memories as Mrs De Silva denies recognizing Hari.

Hari in the novel is depicted very sensitive. One day, he meets Ramu and asks whether something new is being seen in the village. Ramu told him that “The Government is going to build a great factory here. Many factories, hundreds of them.” (p13). Hari could not reconcile himself with Ramu and asked, “And what will happen to the hill and the temple on top?”(p.13). Hari is worried about the prospect of the village. The city people will come and befool innocent villagers. But Hari was not ready to be fooled by city clever tricksters. Nonetheless, out of his penurious family condition, Hari is hopeful to get a job to restore and redeem his family.

Biju, a notorious smuggler while talking to the stranger (a man posted to look after the factory area) came to know that the government is going to build thousands of factories on their farmlands. Biju gets angry and challenges the stranger, “No one can take our land…. It is ours, and we will not sell.” (p.60). Biju continues, “GO build your factories where the land is barren and nothing grows but stones and thorns.”(p.60). Biju asks the stranger, “And what about us who already live here?”(p. 61). The stranger waves his hand as if he were cutting down weeds. “Like that – your village will go. In its place, factories will come up, fertilizer will be made, gas will be produced, many jobs will be created.”(p.61). Further he says, “You mean these boys are to give up their fathers’ land and boats and go to work in factories like city people?”(p.61). The stranger told Biju that there would come engineers and machines to operate factories. This puzzled Hari and Ramu and other fellows.

Meanwhile a young man from Alibagh comes over who asks all Thul cottage dwellers to join and oppose government plan of erecting factories over agro-lands. The young man says, “Every one of us is threatened. Our land is going to be taken away…. Our crops will be destroyed so that their factories can come up instead. All the filth of their factories- for when we produce fertilizes a lot of effluents are created which have to be disposed of – these will be dumped in the sea and will kill the fish for miles around. How will we live without our land, without the sea?”(p.62). He also clarified to Thul villagers that the government will befool us in the name of jobs. The factories will be run by trained engineers. They do not need us. In this way we all shall be fallen to hard times. He told further that we already tried to inform to government officials but we were driven away by batons of police. So we can no longer stand police rule. Finally it was decided to
take out a demonstration before chief minister office. Finally the band of farmers, Hari one of them, reached to Bombay. An elderly man with white beard of Bombay, who was leading them took the megaphone and said, “I have come here to speak to you, and speak for you, because your green fields and the sea are valuable to all of us as they are to you. Our trees, our fish, our cattle and birds have to be protected…” (p.77). This man was stranger to the men from Alibagh. Hari was taken aback and wished to know why did he care so much? The man sensed the feelings of Hari and told that “All the citizens of Bombay are concerned. These factories…will pump deadly chemicals into the air- fertilizer cannot be manufactured without polluting the air for miles around. Sulphor dioxide, ammonia, and dust will be scattered far and wide.” (p.77). By one ruling no factories will be build within fifty miles of big cities. Thul and Rewas are very close to Bombay. “Bombay is heavily industrialized, crowded, and polluted. How much more pollution can we stand?” (p. 77). In Japan, organic mercury was pumped into the sea, it poisoned the fish and the fish poisoned the people who were unlucky enough to eat them. As such the entire eco-system destroyed.

Sayyid Ali another speaker talks of Alibagh geomagnetic observatory, the only one of the type in the world. If factories came up, this observatory would stop working for good. After sometime they decided to march Mantralaya and make Chief Minister aware of. But nobody is talking of Thul and its problem. As one young man says, “Preserve a rotten old observatory just because it is so old? What about our farmers, our crops, our boats? That is what we have come here to see about- not that man’s dusty old office or his files or his jobs.” (79). As the procession ended, all villagers went back to their homes but Hari stayed back. Hari after several hours came into contact a coconut seller. The coconut seller asked him why he had left his home. Hari told him that he came with a procession against government plan of setting up a factory in their village farmlands. The coconut seller tells about government’s callousness. He said, “Ask, ask, ask the government all you like. Do you think the government has ears and can hear? Do you think the government has eyes and can see? I tell you, the government has only a mouth with which it eats- eats our taxes, eats our land, eats the poor.” (85). Hari to see ‘the factory belt of Thana, pouring out evil-smelling smoke and chemicals into the discolored sky, all the land around blighted and bare, not a blade of grass to be seen and the few remaining trees coated with suffocating dust. He wondered if this possibly be the way that the green coastline from Rewas to Alibagh would look like one day.” (135).

Finally Hari returned to his home. One day he was talking to Birdwatcher Sayyid Ali Sahib. He told him that he was one among agitators in Bombay. We wanted to stop building up factories over our farming lands. At this the birdwatcher sighed and said, “So you’re one of those who put up a fight. You’ve lost the fight, you know- we lost the case in court. The politicians won- so they can make plenty of money from the sale of land and licences in the name of progress. Thul is lost….” (p.154). He further says, “Everything is doomed. The fish in the sea will die from the effluents that will be pumped into the water. The paddy fields will be built over by factories and houses and streets. My little baya birds will find no more paddy leaves for their nests.” (154). Hari said to the birdwatcher, “Why do you care so much about the birds, sir?” (p.154). The birdwatcher answers, “The birds are the last free creatures on earth. Everything else has been captured and tamed and enslaved- tigers behind the bars of the zoos, lions stared at
by crowds in safari parks, men and women in houses like matchboxes working in factories that are like prisons.” (154).

To the end it can be said that The Village by the Sea is an interesting text for eco-readers. In it, Anita Desai stands out as a socialist, environmentalist, and eco-friend.

**Works Cited:**

Desai, Anita (1982). The Village by the Sea. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd. (All textual citations are given parenthetically in the body of the text.)

