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Bird Imagery in Anita Desai's *Village by the Sea*

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Imagery, in a literary text, is an author's use of figurative language to add depth to their work and it helps in deepening the readers understanding of the work. It is used to enhance sensory experiences to the work of art. And animal imagery is a literary technique in which writer symbolizes animals with humans. Animal imagery covers the symbolic images of beasts, birds, reptiles, fishes and even a few insects. All around the world different cultures have used animal imagery in their literature for thousands of years. Indian culture is no exception. The Indian writers too use animal imagery in their works and Anita Desai is one of the great imagists of Indian Sub-continent. She often draws her images and symbols from the animal world to depict the themes of ingratitude, unkindness, and disruption of traditional human values and relationships. The origin of her stories, as Anita Desai herself explains, is itself rooted in images: "there are so many images that remain in the mind but they often are also forgotten, they pass through one's life and then they vanish. But there are certain images, certain characters, certain words that you find you don't lose, you remember, they stay with you and eventually these come together, you begin to see what the connection is between them". Same is true to her novel *The Village by the Sea*. In it she has employed animal imagery especially bird imagery abundantly. So I believe bird imagery deserves its own brief comment.

Introduction

Reference to particular birds in literature often brings a deeper meaning to the text and "the idea that the bird represented the soul as opposed to the body, the spiritual in contrast to the earthly, seems universal." (Beryl Rowland in *Birds with Human Souls*). And Anita Desai's bird imagery is central to the fictional world of *The Village by the Sea*. In this novel she uses different and repeated images of birds. Anita Desai herself clarifies that she uses "certain images again and again and that, although real, they acquire the significance of symbols. I imagine each writer ends by thus revealing his own mythology, a mythology that symbolizes his private morality and philosophy." This perhaps explains the predominance of symbols and images in her Guardian Children's Fiction Prize winning novel, *The Village by the Sea*. In it bird imagery is not employed so much to reveal the inner nature of her characters as to convey their situations and instantaneous reactions. *The Village by the Sea* is the story of a poor family, which consists of Hari (the protagonist, who is 12 years old), Lila – his 13 year old elder sister, Bela and Kamal – his two younger sisters, sick bed ridden mother and out of work alcoholic father. Their conditions and situations are mainly presented through bird imagery.

Bird Imagery

The novel commences with the scene of Lila out on the beach early in the morning. Crushed by the burden of looking after her family at a very tender age, Lila "felt she had to flee to the beach" to find solace by seeing the sea and the flowers scattered on the sacred rock. There was no one out on the beach except her. Lila's solitude is brought out in, "no one had walked on it except the birds". For Lila morning time is the best time of the day. She feels perfect peacefulness and happiness at that time. Her happiness and a sense of temporary

relief from the burden of life which she feels while on the beach are brought out through the imagery of birds “flying out of the shadowy, soft-needled casuarina trees and the thick jungle of Pandanus, singing and calling and whistling louder than any other time of the day.” Lila felt consoled by the calling and whistling of “flute-voiced drongoes, glinted blue-black and pert little magpie robins” and a “pair of crested bul-buls” who sang from the branches and an invisible “crow-pheasant”, which called out “coop-coop-coop” and cooing and gurgling of a “pigeon”. All these birds seem “to tell Lila to be calm and happy and all would be well and all would be just as it was before.”

With six family members to take care of, life for Hari is too hard. He decides that he has had enough and wishes to go to Bombay in order to liberate his family from the encagement of poverty. While disclosing his intention to Lila about going to Bombay Hari had felt hopeful but after she had left he wondered how he could do that. The world is ruled by the rich symbolized by the raptor bird, kite – a sort of sky god while poor people like Hari are simply little creatures of earth. He didn't see any hope about how to break the shackles of poverty and be free. His helplessness in the world of sufferings and miseries spread by the rich or cast over by the Fate is symbolised in the scene where he sees “the pariah kites wheeled in the sky, up in the very dome of it, looking down on the crawling sea and the little creatures of earth from their great height and distance...Out of the white-hot sky one of the floating kites swooped suddenly down, snatched up something on the beach and swooped upwards again.” Hari noticed that something was “dangled helplessly from its beak. A pair of kites chased after it, the prey dropped from its beak and Hari saw that it was a dead snake.” But the pigeons which represent divine love and prophecy provide hope and consoles Hari that everything will be alright, “the pigeons cooed and cooed in the great banyan trees, sounding as if they were trying to console.”

After schooling Bela and Kamal had to go to the beach along with other women to collect molluscs for dinner. They are compared with the birds: “They were just like the gulls and curlews and reef herons that stalked the shallows, fishing together, although – unlike the birds – they could not keep quit and chattered and gossiped.”

Anguished Hari is trying to find solutions to get out of the poverty and hunger that surrounds his family. His struggle is depicted through his futile fishing along the shore and what happened there: “All he ever caught were a few gold and silver fish, too tiny to bother to pick up, grasping and swelling up as they puffed for air before they died. And three or four crabs – again too small to have any meat on them. He watched them lying on their backs and kicking their transparent legs in the air. A large black crow came hopping along to see what it could find. Hari amused himself by turning the crabs right side up so they could scuttle away down into the sea and safety. But the crow kept turning them over onto their backs again with its beak. Finally Hari left the crow to it and walked on with his empty net.” Hari was very much depressed and worried about how and who would help him to get out of the poverty? Just then there arrived De Silvas to live in Mon Repose – their holiday cottage on the Thul beach. Their unexpected arrival tensed Hari, Bela and Kamal with excitement. Their excitement is compared with the excitement of “herons, egrets, kingfishers and moorhens all flapping into the dense greenery of the pandanus, the casuarina and the bhindi trees for shelter.”

The De Silva's are very rich and their arrival means temporary jobs for Hari and Lila – to do their errands. When they were about to leave, Mr. De Silva asked Hari if his father might be interested of getting a job as guarding their house but after seeing the drunken

attitude of his father he insulted him and refused to give him the job. Hari was very affected and disappointed with his father's drunkenness and De Silva's insulting words. He tries to whistle away his disappointment and wishes to escape to Bombay. His disappointment and escaping tendency is brought home through the symbolic episode in which Hari "watch a pair of huge kites that seemed to be having a game in the evening sky – floating and rolling on currents of air, always close together as if they were performing a dance...they went rolling and tumbling away...over the field...and out over the sea itself, majestic and purple now with the sun dipping into it as royally as a king going to his repose. Then they vanished from sight. When he thought of all his troubles...Hari wished he too could soar up into the sky and disappear instead of being tied to the earth here". Discouraged and disappointed Hari went back home where Lila told him that their mother's condition worsened. Her condition frightened the children as their dog, Pinto frightened the birds. "Pinto came dashing out of the tall grasses on the bank met them with a delighted bark, making a heron that stood hunch-backed on a stone, staring into the marsh, give a frightened shake of its dull, grey-brown feathers, rise on its toes and flap away into the top of the pandanus grove. Other birds were startled too and called or flew out – the old hidden crow-pheasant warned 'coop-coop-coop' and a pair of drongoes swooped upwards into the sunlight". Poor and helpless Lila sends her younger sisters next door to ask their neighbour if she could help their mother. Instead of coming herself she sent them a magic man who startled their mother with fear and whose calling, "Hari Om, Hari Om" startled the birds that "flew up in fright, screaming and wheeling till he was out of sight and hearing." All these happenings left the family discouraged and hopeless. Their quiet house is now haunted by the feelings of fear and fright. Their condition is paralleled with the birds that are disturbed by the band of men and mongrels and the barking of dogs who "invaded the dense shrubbery that surrounded the creek." And all "the quiet birds that haunted it – the moor hen, the heron, the kingfishers and egrets – had flown." And with them flew Hari to Bombay as he wanted.

When Hari reached Rewas he heard "owls called from the dark". Owls symbolise knowledge, wisdom and foresight. It is in Bombay that he gets the knowledge of many things and the wisdom that running away from ones responsibilities does not provide any solution to the problems but facing them can provide some way out. All this made him foresight his bright future in Thul as Watch-mender. On reaching Bombay he was surprised to see it busy and crowded. Bombay can be compared to "the tall white building called Seabird" where people from different backgrounds have come to live. They live in colonies and migrate like seabirds from one place to another. When Hira Lal, the watchman of Seabird saw Hari confused and lost without somewhere to go, he took him to his friend Jagu who provide him food and job in his restaurant "Sri Krishna Eating House". This situation and his reaction are paralleled with the condition of birds that he watched in the city park: "When he opened his eyes in the morning he saw pigeons tumbling in the dirty grey sky. They came whirring down in a flock to alight on the statue in the middle of the park where a man stood throwing handfuls of grain to them, and Hari watched delightedly as they waddled about on their pink claws, pecking and quarrelling. Every morning this man came to scatter grain for the pigeons and Hari watched them come and feed. Then there was an old woman...who brought a bag of flour to the park and painstakingly sprinkled a pinch of flour on every ant hill...Hari watched her, wondering. He certainly would not have spent his money on feeding birds and ants".

Back at home in Thul Lila was worried and wondering why Hari didn't return home. Just then De Silvas come from Bombay. Lila and her sisters were helping the De Silvas settling in when she came to know that Mr. De Silva was going to drive to Alibagh. She went to ask him for a favour of taking her mother to the hospital which he accepted. There her

condition improved with her husband taking care of her. Before leaving Mr. De Silva provides Lila job of looking after his friend Sayyid Ali Sahib. The sisters didn't know why he stayed and what he is looking at through his binoculars. Then Bela and Kamal assumed that "he is studying the Birds" as they "stared at the tree, too, wondering what he was looking at. There seemed to be nothing there but then they heard a rustle and an ashy grey and russet bird flew out, trailing a long russet tail behind it as it came out of the foliage and around to the back of the house. The man lowered his binoculars with a sigh and drew out a book from his pocket and began to scribble in it."

In Bombay Hari was always consoled by the kind-hearted watch-mender, Mr. Panwallah who is referred as a "wise old bird" having "bird-like eyes". He offered Hari extra work with a salary in his shop. In this way he became his apprentice and foresights his future as a watch-mender. The hot and humid weather of Bombay, tiredness and lack of sleep made Hari ill and homesick. His homesickness is shown in when "he thought of the crows picking up the crabs he caught, and the gulls swooping low over the waves in search of fish. He thought of the heron standing stockstill on a stone by the pond near their hut, and the blue flash of the kingfisher as it darted from the trees...he longed for them all...he put his head on his knees, shut his eyes and tried hard to see them again".

Hari came back to Thul on Dewali after 9 months stay in Bombay. His life in Thul before going to Bombay was entrapped in poverty and responsibility. In Bombay it was the same – poverty and suffering but he matures there and his mind set changes a lot. Back home he is now a new person, a sort of butterfly that "emerged from a cocoon", who on reaching home, saw that nothing has changed. The creek near his house still contains birds. He saw the "heron still stood on its stone, fishing, the kingfisher dived down in a flash of blue and the egret rose up from the reeds as white as snow." He perceives that poverty still prevails in his house but now he is hopeful that he will do something productive in his life. He feels calmness and peacefulness in his heart. His hope and calmness is depicted through his hearing of "the invisible pigeons...letting flow their musical notes".

Hari knew from Lila that Sayyid Ali Sahib, "the birdwatcher", was very nice to them when he was away. This made him visit Sayyid Ali, who was busy in "studying the birds". There Hari came to know that he is "studying the nest-building habits of the baya birds". The birdwatcher told Hari that he had been studying the baya birds "all through the monsoon and now they are bringing up their young". The birdwatcher reminded Hari of Mr. Panwallah as they both "were somehow birdlike". Mr. Panwallah had told him to go on learning and never stop. That is why he too watches the birds in order to learn from them, "although he had never paid the birds any attention before. They were not even pretty birds like the kingfishers or egrets, but small and spotted and brown like sparrows, although some had yellow heads...it struck Hari how wonderful it was that these small creatures had built this colony of strange nests that swung above the water where no one could get at them and harm the young. The nests were shaped like tubes or funnels, and woven neatly out of grasses and paddy leaves, made compact by careful weaving and blobs of mud. The birds flew in and out of them, crying, Tililili, tililee – kiti – tililee – kitee." The bird watcher explained the nature of baya birds to Hari, "It is difficult to build a nest like that that the young male has to practise before he actually plans to build one and raise a family. If anything goes wrong and the nest does not turn out right, he abandons it and starts another. It is only when the nest is perfect that he is satisfied. And he builds several so that he can have several wives. He even decorates them by sticking on flower petals or feathers with blobs of mud to attract the females. Females will only mate with those that have managed to build them good homes."

The baya birds' struggle to build decorative and long-lasting nests symbolizes Hari's struggle and desire to have a beautiful and happy home, in which the father can take care of his children and love their mother. The baya birds practising of building nests and abandoning them till he builds a satisfying one symbolises Hari's abandoning of his traditional way of living – fishing and farming; and switching over to other different jobs till he will be able to set up a watchmending shop in his village Thul.

Hari recognised Sayyid Ali Sahib as the Bombay man who along with the Alibagh farmers had taken up a fight against the government's decision to build the factories in Thul but unfortunately they lost the case in court. Sayyid Ali told him that "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 the factories and houses and streets. My little baya birds will find no more paddy leaves for their nests. Or grain or food for their young. They will have to fly away." This symbolises Hari's previous situation of futile fishing and running away to Bombay. In Bombay he realises that he is not free and can't fly like the birds because he is the creature of earth and not sky. He is bound to sticks his feet on the earth whatsoever the conditions and situations will be. This realisation is symbolised through the conversation between Sayyid Ali, the birdwatcher and Hari. When Hari asked him why did he "care so much about the birds"? He replied, "The birds are the last free creatures on earth. Everything else has been captured and tamed and enslaved – tigers behind the bars of zoos...men and women in houses like matchboxes working in factories that are like prisons. Only the birds are free and can take off and fly away into space when they like...I suppose that is why I love them – for their freedom, which we don't have. Perhaps I would also like to leave all...and fly with them." But Hari reminded him that "we can't fly...we are here on earth, we cannot leave it. We must live here, somehow." This episode symbolises the escapist quality in Sayyid Ali as well as Hari's self realization.

After the government will set up factories in Thul, there will be no more fishing or farming. In order to survive people will be forced to work in the factories or do some other works to suit the new environment. Hari didn't want to work in the factory, instead he is thinking to "start a poultry farm, sell eggs in the village and chickens to the rich people who will come to Thul once the factory is built." He also desires to "set up a watchmending shop". Hari is ready to adapt the new environment just "as birds and animals must do if they are going to survive. Just like the sparrows and pigeons that have adapted themselves to city life and live on food leftovers and rubbish thrown to them in the streets instead of searching for grain and insects in the fields."

Anita Desai overwhelms the novel *The Village by the Sea* with a number of bird images to depict the symbolic connection between birds and men. She succeeds in unveiling the characters aspirations for freedom, strong desire for liberation, struggle for survival, hope for better future, and conflicts and confusions through bird imagery. For Anita Desai birds can prove great teachers if "we understood them" and they can "show us and teach us many important things."

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