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Anita Desai's *The Village By The Sea*: An Environmental Study

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Anita Mazumdar Desai (born 24 June 1937) is an Indian novelist and the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As a writer she has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times; she received a Sahitya Academy Award in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, from the Sahitya Academy, India's National Academy of Letters.

"The Village by the Sea: an Indian family story" is a novel for young people by the Indian writer Anita Desai, published in London by Heinemann in 1982. It is based on the poverty, hardships and sorrow faced by a small rural, community in India. Desai won the annual Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, a book award judged by a panel of British children's writers.

"Much of the novel's interior normative plot lines are developed by author Anita Desai's childhood experiences at the hill station, Mussoorie (India).

"Penguin published a U.S. edition in 1984.

"The Village by the Sea is set in a small village called Thul in Western India (14 kilometres from Bombay) and focuses on a family trying to make ends meet. The main protagonists are Lila, the eldest child who is 13 years old, and her 12-year-old brother Hari. They also have two younger sisters, Bela and Kamal. They live with their mother, who has been chronically ill and is bed-ridden. Their father is an alcoholic, which forces Hari and Lila to manage the family. There is a lot of pressure on them due to the constant demand of meeting their needs. Although their father was earning money, he used to spend it to buy alcohol. With two younger sisters and a bed ridden mother to take care of, life for Lila and Hari is too hard. Hari decides that he has had enough and leaves for Bombay to find work. Lila is left alone to take care of her family, and struggles to do so. Help comes from an unexpected source, the rich De Silvas who have a farmhouse- Mon Repos next to their hut. Meanwhile, Hari is new in the city of dreams, Mumbai and he is all alone. A kind restaurant owner, Jagu, pities upon him and welcomes him to work in his restaurant. There, Hari builds a strong friendship with Mr. Panwallah, the lovable watch repairer whose shop is just beside the shop Jagu had. Through his experience with Mr. Panwallah and Jagu and the chain of events that take place in Bombay, Hari realizes that he could actually make a career as a watchmaker. Meanwhile, Lila, Bela and Kamal admit their sick mother in town hospital through the help of the De Silvas. Their father turns over a new leaf, and accompanies their mother throughout her 7-month treatment. When Hari returns to the village soon-after, he finds the environment of his home totally changed. As Hari reunites with his sisters, they all begin sharing stories with each other detailing the changes that took place after Hari left. Hari also explains the watch repair skills he learned in Bombay and reveals his plans to start a small repair shop in the village. Together; Lila, Hari, Bela, and Kamal all form a plan to use Hari's saved money (which he made and brought back from Bombay) to start a

small chicken farm as a start-up business for the family and financial support base for Hari's future repair shop. As Hari goes to the village to buy chicken netting fence and tools to build a chicken pen, a traveller converses with him and marvels at Hari upon learning his plans. As the novel ends, the traveller highlights Hari and his sister's resolve to adapt and change in this growing and ever developing world.

“Anita Desai has explicitly described in her very own style of writing, and she shows how Hari in the dilapidated conditions of the Sri Krishna Eating House finds warmth and affection through Mr Panwallah - owner and watch mender of the Ding-Dong watch shop. Mr Panwallah instills confidence in Hari and comforts him when he is terribly home sick. He even gives Hari a vivid and inspiring future and teaches him watch mending. This shows that even in one of the busiest, rickety and ramshackle cities such as Bombay there is still hope, love and affection. He also goes back to Thul with the help of Mr Panwallah and Jagu insisting to buy the bus ticket. Jagu shows some generosity by giving him some extra money to be brought back to his family.”

“Desai's subject matter may be stereotypical, but her treatment and sensitive prose give depth to the story, Every minute detail and image ... assumes meaning and fits into the intricate, multi-layered pattern of the novel.”

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Village_by_the_Sea)

The novel ‘The Village by the Sea’ by Anita Desai is masters stoke in presenting the enviro-care approach through its depiction of the simple and poor family life of a sea side village called Thul. This village is two miles from Alibagh and fourteen kilometer from Bombay by sea. The journey of Hari through the pages of the novel takes him to Alibagh and Bombay and back again to Thul where he decides to settle along with his parents and three sisters. The novelist appears enviro-friendly as she has created scenes, characters, story, dialogues, setting etc..., using enviro-caring tone and by keeping it when discussing or depicting on the given issue/ theme.

As the novelist points out:

“The story of the novel is based entirely on fact. Thul is a real village on the western coast of India and all the characters in this book are based on people who live in this village; only their names have been altered.”

(Desai,. Introduction : ‘The village by the sea’)

Thus, the line between fact and fiction is blurring here.

Compared with the busy Bombay, life in Thul is easy, slow and down to earth. The urban/rural dividing line works very much hand in hand with culture /nature dichotomy. The news that Ramu tells Hari about the setting of the fertilizers factory in the village brings the point of tension and the novelist complete the picture with the news that the government has

sanctioned the factory. The people in the village are not happy with this change in their life. The worry here is that Thul, with its ample natural glory would lose all the beauty, peace and serenity of the surrounding. This way of plotting and putting the story transfers the enviro-care approach into the new realm of nature friendly world.

” Soon they would be sending bulldozers and earthmovers and steamrollers. They are going to widen the highway – make it twice as broad. The machines can be brought here. Then they will build houses for the workers. The workmen will come. The factories will be built.”

(Page 12)

Thus the novelist shows how the simple life in Thul would be disturbed by development brought out by the government. The pro and cons of this development must be worked out. Development must be sustainable and eco-friendly.

The novelist seems to know, quite rightly, that there is everything in nature for human need but hardly anything for his greed. Against the greed of having everything in the cement-concrete jungles in metropolitan city like Mumbai stands out the natural beauty of the village of Thul, where people have minimum needs. Thus, the message is quite clear that if you are living in harmony with nature and its surrounding which are natural you become its protector and when you consume a lot of natural resources for human greed's you become destroyer. Human being need to be 'rakshak' (protector) of nature rather than becoming 'bhakshak' (destroyer) of nature. The novel seems to warn us that if we continue to kill nature there would be nothing left for future generation. Nature has its own way of answering –i-e, there would be cyclones, earthquakes, storms, acidic rain etc...

The book is divided into thirteen chapters. Each chapter takes the story ahead. It narrates the interesting story of Hari, the poor lad, with three sisters and a drunkard father and an ill mother on bed on a surface level as an example. However, read from the green lens at deeper level, it provides the enviro-care as a solution to the problem of unplanned developmental attitude/ mentality/practices of the human being. It warns the reader to live in peace and harmony with the nature (not human nature but the nature as one sees in trees, oceans, other species, mountains etc...). The treasure of natural life in village is immense as compared to wealthy (economically) city life.

Thul is going to have a new Thul-Vaishet fertilizer complex, where they would be factories, housing colonies, shopping centers, bus depots, railway heads, engineers and workers – a whole city is going to be built here. In place of manure fertilizers these chemical factories would produce tons of chemicals to be sent all over the country. The claim is that these chemical fertilizers would make the crop grow better and faster in the field; but they would cut short the fertile lands and its capacity to grow crops. Surely, there would be jobs in the factory for everyone but they would take away the farm land from the farmer at a prize to be decided by

them and give jobs in its place. So the owner, free farmer would become a worker, slave of these capitalist owner of the factories.

There is a revolt against this project of setting up of a factory and the villagers decide to as built a strike against it. They decide to go to Bombay to show their unhappiness over the project. However their demands and rights fall on a deaf ear as the government sanctions the projects. The government takes up a fertile land of the farmer's without even consulting them. They should have chosen a barren land with consultation and from farmer. So there is exploitation under the name of development of not only human being but also of the nature.

Birds, animals and tree etc... would vanish with no span of time. We need to care of all the wealth in nature at least for the sake of the next generation. Otherwise all these species would remain only in picture and there would no species other than human on this planet. There is a bird-watcher from de Silvia family who has a binocular to observe the birds without harming them.

In the stormy night the news about fisherman of the Thul disappearing shows that nature has its own way to reply to human greed. It seems to suggest that no matter whatever we, humans, would do we would not be able to conquer nature. The Panwallah recollect his experience of Bombay and says:

“Fifty years ago there were hills, gardens and beautiful palaces and villas where you now see slums, shop, traffic, crowds. Once I lived in a villa with a garden and roses and fountains- now I live in a pigeon roost over a railway station!”

(Page 210)

In the age of globalization, it is a duty of every citizen of world community to save the planet earth and pass on this ball to the next generation with the lesson that they have learnt. Education is a tool through this can be done. Nature friendly vision must be invented and shown to the human community on global level through use of mass multi-media.

Hari decides to run a watch mending shop along with fishing, farming and poultry-farm as his side business spreads the light of hope in the darkness of human greed. The novel ends with a happy reunion of one family on micro level but gives a lesson at macro level to the world community. It lights a candle of hope in the darkness of lack of knowledge. The planet would be safe only when every citizen takes a step ahead and decides to burn this lamp of knowledge at global level.

The soft version of the novel in the form of a movie and the hard copy of original text given to the reader is an attempt in this direction. The audience/the reader must credit and thank the writer for serving such a delicious dish. We need more of such stories. Then, it would a real Diwali and the dish of sweet would be enjoyed and it would spread happiness on every face. We

need to be optimistic about our life as the end of this novel suggest. As, the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhiji, used to say: 'Go back to Village'. His message is well connoted by the title of this novel.

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