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## **Study of the Elements of Bildungsroman in Anita Desai's Novel: *The Village by the Sea***

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### **Abstract:**

Anita Desai's character-based novels register a clash between the inner and outer worlds of the individual and this confrontation subverts their entire self until they pluck courage to shield their identity. Desai's novel *The Village by the Sea* is about a psychological development of the protagonist due to some prospective changing social values of a small fishing village, Thul. Unlike her earlier novels, this novel is different in its kind as it features the protagonist's attempt to embark on a journey from his ignorance to the attainment of knowledge in order to face the challenges of life. In this paper my objective is to analyse this proposed novel in the light of Bildungsroman, as the genre focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist whose ultimate "goal is the recognition of one's identity and role in the world" (Abrams 198). The paper proposes to study the key characteristics of Bildungsroman and explores in what ways the novel confirms to the traits of the genre or what type of social or moral values are conveyed through this novel?

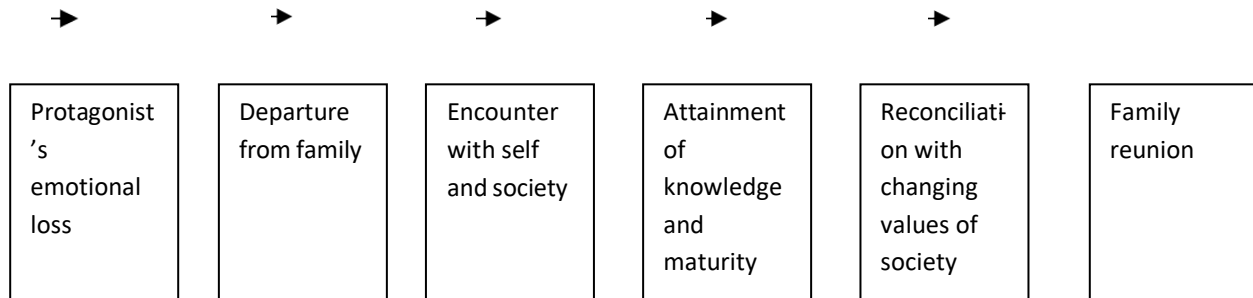
**Keywords:** analysis of theme and characters.

Anita Desai is "the most distinguishing and promising novelists of the youngest set" (Atma Ram 42). As a novelist she is concerned with the predicament of the individual vis a vis the social forces that threaten human identity. Desai has a knack for dealing with psychologically and emotionally deprived characters that are "driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general currents" (Chakranarayan 89). In her novels she registers a clash between the inner and outer worlds of an individual which subverts his/her entire self until s/he plucks courage to shield her/his identity. The narrative of the novel *The Village by the Sea* (1982) also revolves round a conflict between the

self and the society but unlike her earlier novels, the protagonist of the proposed novel neither escapes from his responsibilities nor embraces death as a defeated self rather it focuses on the integration of the self and the society which makes this novel an appropriate example of Bildungsroman.

Bildungsroman, a subclass of novel, is a German term. It is originated from two German words: 'bildung' and 'roman' meaning 'education'/'formation' and 'novel' respectively which refer to the German tradition of 'self-cultivation'. This signifies the "novel of formation" (Abrams 198) or novel of growth that marks the protagonists' mental and psychological development from their ignorant childhood to a mature and sane adulthood. Besides this, the evolution involves the recognition of their identity and role in the society around them.

In fact, the term was coined by Karl Morgenstern and used by Wilhelm Dilthey who legitimized and popularized it in 1870 and 1905 respectively but with the publication of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96) the genre came into vogue. Though the genre proliferated in Germany, it influenced the writers across the globe rapidly. In England, the term was popularized by Carlyle with his translation of Goethe's classic work into English in 1824 which paved the way for the other English writers to toe the line. Bildungsroman is different from the other subclasses of novel because the narrative in such novels revolves around the protagonist—may be either 'an artist', 'an orphan', 'a runaway' or 'a misfit'--- who while grappling against the issues of 'class struggle', 'sexual frustration' or 'alienation' finally become able to evolve his/her character. Secondly, it lays emphasis on the protagonist's attainment of maturity, recognition of his/her roles and identity in the world and besides these, such novels give a deep insight into the lives of the characters and their struggle against the inner and outer crises. There is a long list of the novels centering on the theme of the protagonist's attainment of role and identity in the world. In this context Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Johns: A Foundling* (1749), Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850), Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) etc. can be seen as an example of Bildungsroman. In order to focus on the protagonist's journey to the formation of his/her character through several thick and thins, the plot in Bildungsroman generally unfolds as mentioned below:



While dealing with some of the common features of the proposed subclass of novel, it is generally observed that societal constraints compel the protagonists' propensity for the attainment of maturity to leave their locale and family with a view to going to a more developed city for the betterment of their condition. This separation helps them realize their roles in the world. On their journey to the attainment of maturity, the protagonists are always accompanied by some strangers who play crucial role in broadening their understanding and practical knowledge about the world. After the attainment of knowledge, the protagonists unite with their family. Bildungsroman always ends with positive note that people's mental strength enables them to overcome all that hampers their gateway to success.

When it comes to analyse any Indian English Novel dealing with the traits of Bildungsroman, it can be said that Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* seems to fall into this category as the novel features some of the traits of the genre. The narrative of the novel revolves around a poverty-stricken family in which mother is bed-ridden, drunken father passes his days in wandering around toddy shops and the responsibilities of four children (Lila, Hari, Kamal and Bela) are left to their fate. It is often noticed that Anita Desai's novels are not peopled by indulgent parents, and children do not lead a protected childhood rather her novels are full of sensitive and convincing portraits of children and very insensitive parents. In the absence of father's care and support, the oldest son of the family-Hari upholds the familial responsibilities. Hari, a drop out and disillusioned teenager, works in his field, catches fish and sells coconuts despite that, he fails to make both ends meet. The family passes its days in utter dejection. Days of scarcity do not consternate him as much as he feels hopeless to hear about the news of the opening of a factory in Thul. The news was not less than any impending challenge to Hari's life. He is puzzled because in order to set up the factory, the government will confiscate their lands while the chief vocation in Thul is either farming or fishing. Hari

grows apprehensive that if the factory is started in Thul, all of them will be either out of work or be forced to work as workers in the factory.

The assumptions of the inhabitants of Thul regarding the factory disappoint Hari and he starts to question his abilities. A moment's introspection compels him to realize that he has neither money to run his business nor any college degree to work like a "babu" in the factory and in absence of three requisites: 'money', 'degree' and 'experience', the chances of finding a job in Thul is very slight. Here it is noteworthy that in the period of fast changing social values, when 'the old ways of spinning yarn and grinding wheat is replaced by the readymade materials produced in the factories,' the protagonist of the novel does not know "what chemicals are, factories are, what fertilizers is good for" (Village 65). France Moretti writes: "the main conflict in the Bildungsroman is the myth of modernity with its overvaluation of youth and progress" (WIKIPEDIA). Basically, Hari finds Thul in its old ways and its inhabitants not more than "pumpkin heads" (*Village* 64) who don't consider anything beyond fishing and farming. Though Hari is not familiar with the workings of factory and fertilizers yet unlike the inhabitants of Thul, he wants to make such a career choice as no one else has ever made before. He makes a desperate attempt to become a machine literate in order to cope with the challenges of the modern world but finds that his birth place, Thul does not match up to his aspiration as while living amidst the fishers and the boatmen, his dream of doing something new will be foundered. He withdraws into himself and finds that he is a 'social misfit.'

Amidst the dilemma of 'what to do' and 'what not to', De silva's offer of a car cleaner job in Bombay comes to Hari as a great relief. However, De silva's insulting words for Hari's father-a compulsive drinker, aggravates the situation. He gets angry with both De silva and his father. Here Raja Rao's line "age brings anger" (Rao 59) aptly applies to Hari's mental state. Hari tries hard to pocket the insult but his growing age takes De silva's scathing comments about his father to his ego- which is not prepared to tolerate such humiliations. He takes De silva's words to his personal self and detests his father who somewhere becomes a reason for his social humiliation. It is noticeable that he reasons with himself what though he happens to be a poor and helpless teenager, no one has right to humiliate him. He feels like not only retaliating against all that hurts his ego and but also senses a terrible urge to run away from his family and its consecutive problems. Hunger, humiliation, suppressed anger, fear, lack of knowledge

and skills make him wish to disappear from both his belongings and this vale of tears. Here he finds himself emotionally lost and becomes insensitive to the needs of his family for a short period of time. Thus, the novel fulfils the first criterion for featuring an emotionally lost and misfit protagonist who grapples against the challenges of shouldering his responsibilities.

But when he looks at his sisters' hopeless, helpless and tired faces, his heart fills with a sense of guilt at the thought of chucking his familial responsibilities. He reasons with himself and comes to realize that it is a time not for showing his anger but for sustaining his sonly and brotherly duties because if he shuns off his familial responsibilities in these dire straits, none can save the members of his family from dying of starvation or falling ill. So, he decides to be responsive to his responsibilities and resolves to change himself at all costs. By and by, Hari seems to overcome his sense of self-hatred. In this context better to mention what Swami Vivekanand writes, "our first duty is not to hate ourselves, because to advance we must have faith in ourselves first..." (Vivekanand 13). Though he does not know what to do to support his family yet he is steadfast in his determination and as it is often observed that when a man has a definite purpose of his life, he will definitely find ways to achieve that. A very similar viewpoint has been supported by Viktor E. Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* where he quotes Nietzsche's line, "he who has a why to live, can bear with almost anyhow" (Frankl 84). In Hari's context this line becomes relevant because as soon as he accepts his familial duties as his ultimate objective, the clouds of doubts and suspects that have suspended his free thinking so far, now start to clear away.

With Hari's departure to Bombay owing to his inability to fulfil the changing and advanced requirements of a modern society, the novel seems to fulfill the second criterion of Bildungsroman i.e., the protagonist's departure from his family or birth place due to his emotional loss and internal or external crises which is often followed by his journey to the attainment of knowledge and maturity.

In pursuit of acquiring knowledge, Hari joins a group of protestors- going to protest against the government policy of confiscating the lands of the inhabitants of Thul. The group works like an eye opener for Hari because before joining the group, he considers himself only as an unskilled, misfit dropout whose family cannot survive until he learns the ways and skills to face the challenges of life but after joining this group, he realizes that he is not more than "a landless, boatless and jobless father's son" (*Village* 127). Here he is taken aback to admit that

his father's social status defines and determines his identity up to great extent. Now the biggest challenge before him is 'the question of his identity' and he interrogates his personal self to find an answer to the question who he really is. In this context it can be noticed that "accelerating succession of urgent societal demands adolescent faces formidable challenges in the essential task of deciding who they are, what they are going to be and how are going to get these" (The *Changing World Order*).

The problem with Hari is his inability to decide what he really is because the group belongs to both the farmers and the boatmen while Hari owns neither a boat to be called a boatman nor has enough land to be called a farmer. Finding himself all alone in the company of the strangers, Hari repents over his decision to have joined them. A sense of confusion overpowers his will to support his family. Psychologically he seems to be on the see-saw of to be or not to be. On the one hand the responsibilities of the family and his inability to fix them compel him to go to such a place where he can find workable solutions to them on the other hand, the thought of being unguided on his journey and untutored in his objective frightens this despondent teenager. Finding himself all alone on his journey, Hari comes to realise that his purpose behind coming to Bombay is not to wander to and fro or to become a beggar, a crook or a murderer. Here Hari would have gone astray, had a stranger not taught him that in order to survive, Hari needs 'to be a man' and should stop expecting things from both others and the government because none can be anyone's 'father,' 'mother' or 'savior.' In order to survive one has to learn to fend for oneself.

After getting separated from the group, Hari's feels his station like that of any destitute who does not know where to go and what to do. Here the readers can notice that on his journey, Hari is assisted by De Silva's watchman who while taking pity on him, takes him to Jagu's 'The Sri Krishna Eatery' which provides him both shelter and work to make a living for his family. This is how Hari is saved from going astray in the city of the strangers. As a cook's helper, Hari passes his days in kneading and washing up but he seems to be in two minds about continuing his work as a cook's helper because somewhere his pent-up desires for doing something different and learning new things rankle with him time to time. It is said that when "the student is ready, the teacher will appear" (Kalam 25). Hari's quest for learning new things is fulfilled while coming under the juxtaposition of Mr. Panwallah, a watch mender. By taking Hari on as his apprentice, he not only saves Hari's life from falling into a complete silence at

The Sri Krishna Eatery but also opens the “doors of fortune” (Village 172) for him. Hari feels overwhelmed to find someone kind enough to enable him to make something of his worthless life.

It is noticeable that in Bildungsroman the protagonists are always accompanied by some supporting characters who may either be their ‘friends,’ ‘soulmates,’ ‘mentor,’ or any ‘teacher.’ Similarly in this novel, Hari’s life is given a right direction by some benevolent strangers and a kind teacher, Mr. Panwallah- a truly benefactor, the kindest and most helpful of all. He was a real teacher as he instills into Hari’s mind the lesson of hard work. Pointing that, everyone advises him only about the dos and don’ts but Mr. Panwallah is different as he trains Hari’s mind to think positively and besides this, he hands on his skill of watch mending to Hari as regarding him an eligible and right person. Mr. Panwallah is a person who believes in positive outlook towards life because things change all the time and nobody remains where he or she is stuck to. According to him to survive, grow and change, Hari will have to “learn, learn and learn” (Village 210) and should make efforts for that to happen. Mr. Panwallah’s teachings influence him so much that while forgetting all about his emotional loss and nostalgia, Hari starts to take his points. Shiv Khara writes that a person with positive attitude “becomes a contributing member of society and an asset to their country” (Khara 10). Mr. Panwallah’s attitude to see always the bright side of life somewhere compels Hari to ponder over his untapped potentials. As a true counselor, he tells him about his potential to work as a ‘fisherman,’ a ‘farmer,’ a ‘poultry farmer’ or as a ‘watch mender’ (Village 211) in future. On hearing about so many career options available to him, Hari feels confident enough to uphold his responsibilities in distant future.

On the Coconut Day, Mr. Panwallah notices a major change in Hari’s personality when he competes with other urchins for a coconut and holds on there until he grabs the coconut from them. This incident manifests Hari’s growth into a tough competitor and his tenacity to win. Having been paid a ten rupee note for mending his first watch, Hari feels a sudden surge of confidence in himself and finds that he is no longer ‘a child’ rather has grown into maturity to earn his living and take his decisions. Hari’s acquiring of mental and physical abilities to face the challenges of further life somewhere fills his mentor’s heart with a sense of unbound happiness and satisfaction when he says to Hari, “I don’t need to worry about you any more” (Village 218). Mr. Panwallah’s satisfaction can be expressed through Henry L. Derozio’s

poem 'To the Pupil,' which expresses teachers' joy when they:

“... watch the gentle opening of your  
minds And the sweet loosening of the  
spell that binds Your intellectual energies  
and power

X X X X X X X X

What joyance rains upon me when  
I see Fame in the mirror of  
futuraity,

X X X X X X X X X X X

Ah then I feel I have not lived in vain” (Archive).

It can be inferred that the best moment in a teachers' life is when they observe their students acquiring of mental ability to receive new knowledge and new perception while casting the gossamer of ignorance which have clutched their grasp of the world so far and they become assured of their students' successful life in the coming future. Mr. Panwallah also feels happy to see that in Hari's mind the clutches of 'diffidence,' 'fear,' 'indecision,' 'ignorance' and 'dilemma,' are replaced by the 'positive thought realm,' 'hard work' and 'firm determination.' He is assured that the lessons of life-- he has taught-- will always empower and guide Hari to sustain life under any circumstances in future.

This is how the protagonist's journey to the attainment of knowledge and maturity under the guidance of Mr. Panwallah, is completed and he realizes that he can live neither beyond his birthplace nor without his family, of which he is an inseparable part. His realization propels him towards protagonists' next and inevitable journey in Bildungsroman i.e. Hari's journey back to his birthplace for family reunion.

Here the readers can notice that Mr. Panwallah and Jaggu help him another time to reach his birthplace. Hari's return to Thul with some clear objectives in his mind, makes him realise as if he were a new person who has emerged from "a lightly shut box to see light" or as "a newly butterfly" (*Village* 230) emerged from a cocoon. On his way to hospital, Hari comes

across Ramu--a villager, who notices a complete transformation in Hari's personality and finds that Hari is no longer a social misfit- who wanted to run away from everything before after his journey- rather he has become a mature man to challenge the complexities of life.

Sayyid Ali- another villager, also marvels at Hari's changed outlook towards life when Hari tells him what though the government happen to take their arable land, it can only deprive them of their terrain, not of their inner strength or willpower that empower them to conquer life under any adverse situation. Here Sayyid Ali notices that Hari has become a person who is focused on finding a solution to any problem rather than the problem itself. He is not willing to work like any servant rather he plans to run his poultry farm. Here it is noteworthy that he does not know how to run a poultry farm but he recalls what Mr. Panwallah taught him to be ever ready to learn new things because learning is not difficult. Besides poultry farm, Hari wishes to open his watch mending shop. He feels pride in mending Sayyid Ali's wrist watch. In the village, Hari appears to be a more optimistic, judicious and enlightened boy who has learned to adapt himself to the changing requirements and values of the society. Sayyid Ali thinks that in the phase of social transition, Hari has developed the instinct of adaptation which is natural to animals and birds. Shiv Khera writes that "the most important thing one can learn is to learn to learn" (Khera 20) and Hari develops an ability to apply his knowledge to overpower his problems. Khera further writes that "a person can or will be successful with or without formal education if they have the 5 Cs: character, commitment, conviction, courtesy and courage" (Khera 21). Though on his journey to the attainment of knowledge, Hari does not get a formal education from any school yet he has the attributes of a sound character, commitment to his goals, conviction in hard work and learning new things, courtesy for others and courage to surmount the challenges of life which enable him to succeed in the face of misfortunes. This is how the protagonist seems to fulfil another criterion of Bildungsroman i.e., the protagonist's reconciliation with the changing values of society.

His dream of getting united with his family comes true at Diwali when his mother, having been cured of her chronic illness, gets back from hospital, his father--a compulsive drinker--becomes teetotaler and the sisters get happy to see everyone at home. Hari feels contented with this family reunion and looks forward to positive changes taking place in Thul also.

To conclude, it can be said that the proposed novel makes a justified study of the

elements of Bildungsroman as the narrative unfolds a conflict between a disillusioned, misfit teenager and the societal requirements due to the protagonist's lack of knowledge and ignorance. This conflict necessitates his departure from his family and birthplace. Though his journey to unknown land is not easy yet his interaction with different people (De Silva's watchman, Jagu, Mr. Panwallah, Sayyid Ali and two unnamed strangers) broaden his understanding of the society and help in his mental and psychological growth. He does not receive any academic knowledge yet he learns the lessons of the basic characteristics of humanity which lead to a sustainable life. After learning the lessons of hard work, positive thinking and the skill of watch-mending, he gets back to Thul where he tells other inhabitants to have staunch belief in positive thinking and optimistic outlook towards life. Better to mention what Shiv Khera writes that the true objective of education is to teach "us not only how to make a living but also how to live" (Khera 09). The novel ends with a misfit protagonist's mental and psychological transformation into a sane and mature person who is not threatened by any unexpected, unknown fear rather his knowledge and maturity help him reconcile with his family and society. The narrative of the protagonist is a message to the readers---who observe him evolving through the hardships of life---that in place of letting oneself down or losing heart when nothing comes round to the way as one wants, one should always "march on and on/ Nor right nor left, but to the goal" (POEMHUNTER.COM) to adapt oneself to the changing requirements of the modern time.

However, it is noticeable that despite dealing with the commonly accepted thematic pattern and key traits of the characters of Bildungsroman, the novel does not seem to fulfill one criterion i.e., Bildungsroman is mostly written in autobiographical style. The theme of the genre manifests the life story of the writers or the making of the writer as an artist. For example, the narratives of the novels such as: Charles Dickens' *Great Expectation* (1861), James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-15), Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) etc. deal with the life story of the writers up to some or great extent but the proposed novel does not deal with the life story of its novelist, Anita Desai.

Basically, the novel *The Village by the Sea* is meant to be written for teenagers. It is a child fiction yet it marks a positive departure from the tradition of Anita Desai's "dark novels" (Smith *The New York Times*) because the message conveyed through this novel is missing from her earlier ones in which the protagonists seek the solution to the challenges of life either in

committing suicide (*Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City, Fire on the Mountain*) or surrendering themselves at the altar of social requirements (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?, In Custody*). What though the protagonist happens to be a teenager, the efforts he makes to save his family from the mighty paws of poverty, paucity and ailments are unprecedented in her earlier novels. Hari's journey to his mental and psychological growth makes this novel an appropriate example of Bildungsroman.

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