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SCRUTINIZING ANITA DESAI'S *THE VILLAGE BY THE SEA*: AN ANALYSIS ON THE THEMATIC STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai is one of the most eminent and celebrated Indian English writers of the post-colonial era. Her contribution towards the contemporary Indian English novel remains almost unparalleled and hence her acclaim as a literary icon spreads far and wide on shores and beyond the shores. It is quite notable that she discovers new horizons in the world of fiction writing through her innovative approach with which she effectively deliberates on the burning issues in the contemporary Indian society, both rural and urban. In her writings, Desai effectively captures the conflict between and among her characters who are confronted with the unmitigated realities of life and even more interesting is the way she scans their mindset thus investigating the psychological intricacies of the human being. The objective of this research paper is to examine the thematic structure of Anita Desai's novel, *The Village by the Sea* which is one of her major literary successes. It is in a very intriguing way that this novel explores the story of an Indian rural family which survives a period of extreme circumstances to happily reunite in the end thanks to the perseverance of the two heroic children, Hari and Lila. The theme of survival and adaptation comes out for examination as the most important subject that the writer deals with in the novel under scrutiny. In addition, Desai probes a number of some other debatable issues in the contemporary Indian society through her novel, *The Village by the Sea*. The vitality of her thematic concerns and her strong emphasis on the complexities of the human existence along with her remarkable narrative techniques seem to have contributed immensely to the success of the novel concerned thus symbolizing her excellence and uniqueness as a writer of fiction.

Keywords: The Village by the Sea, Anita Desai, thematic concerns, contemporary society, adaptation and survival

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Born on June 24, 1937 in Mussoorie, India, Anita Mazumdar Desai is a world renowned Indian English novelist who has thrice been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. In 1978, she was awarded with a Sahitya Academy Award for her novel, *Fire on the Mountain* by the Sahitya Academy which is the National Academy of Letters in India. Also, for the novel, *The Village by the Sea*, she

received the 1983 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize which is a once-in-a-lifetime book award judged by an esteemed panel of British children's writers. Desai's language of self-expression is English which she considers as the "language of books". Even though she had been aspiring to become a writer from her childhood, she emerged on the literary scenario of India after the independence. In her

writings, Desai explores the complexities of the life of especially the child and the woman at the shackles of the burning issues in the contemporary society. As contended by Dr. M. S. Ansari in his paper, "A Study of the Themes of Alienation, Detachment and Relationship Crisis in Anita Desai's Major Novels", in the hands of Desai, the novel is not a tool for escaping the reality, but a microscope with which she zooms in on the untamed complexities of the human life and the inner psyche of her characters. Therefore, Desai's timely thematic concerns seem to have blended together with her innovative approach and keen sense of observation in enhancing her popularity as one of the greatest writers of all time of Indian literature in English.

Anita Desai writes the novel, *The Village by the Sea* in order to depict several themes. It is a really moving novel which revolves round the story of an Indian rural family which is virtually crippled by poverty and helplessness. Hari is the only boy in the family and he has an elder sister, Lila and two younger sisters, Bela and Kamal. His mother is a bedridden TB patient while his father is an alcoholic who seems to have completely neglected his responsibilities as a father and a husband. This situation has forced Lila and Hari to take the family responsibility to their hand thus meeting the needs of their younger sisters and taking a good care of their sick mother. Seeking greener pastures, Hari, the protagonist of the novel along with his beloved sister, Lila almost like angels from heaven toil upward tooth and nail with unflagging courage in order to save their family from the misery they are currently undergoing. According to the view of Professor G. Vaidyanathan in his book, *The Village by the Sea: A Critical Study*, the most fundamental theme conveyed through the novel is survival accompanied by adaptation. Desai very cleverly and vividly reveals the importance of the need to adapt ourselves to the changing conditions of the environment where we live. Everyone has to further constant learning in order to enhance the necessary abilities to lead a successful life in an environment which seems to undergo revolutionary and almost inexorable changes at an unprecedented rate with the passage of time.

It is mainly through the character of Hari that Desai tries to emphasize the theme of survival and adaptation. Hari is a small boy of twelve years. In spite of being such a youngster, he is intelligent enough to understand his responsibilities towards his family. Seeing no way out of their mounting poverty, Hari is forced to accept it despite his very young age and desperately makes a great effort in earning a living to preserve his family. Hari cultivates the patch of land owned by them, plucks coconuts, and fishes along the sea belt with his net. Unfortunately, the harvest reaped is not enough even for the consumption of his own family. Even though he tries hard to catch fish, most of the time he has to go home empty-handed. Even when the going gets tough, it is very patiently that Hari, though with occasional reluctance, tries hard to survive the swelling heap of hardships and difficulties. Although a majority of Hari's attempts to sustain the family are in vain at the beginning, he never quits trying. At the climax of his dissatisfaction with the father's drunkenness and the never ending troubles at home, Hari leaves Thul and migrates to Bombay in search of a job and consequently Lila happens to grapple with the family situation all alone. The delightful reunion of the family and the stability that they attain in the end after a chaotic period of extreme difficulties show that no matter how small you are, there is always a remedy ahead of you if you are smart enough and persevere to achieve your goals. This is how the writer expresses the need to fight for the survival. The use of a character of such a young boy who is only twelve to reveal her message, enhances the effectiveness of its appeal.

The fact that adaptation is part of survival is a universally acknowledged truth. We live in a rapidly moving world and almost nothing remains the same as time passes by. Surviving in such a fast changing world is not an easy task because we should possess the necessary capacity to adjust ourselves to the changing conditions of the society. Towards the end of the story, Hari gains the ability to move ahead with the changing circle of life and society. A new factory complex is to be put up in Thul. The villagers are distracted by the feeling that it will be a doom on their farming and fishing

industry. They begin to think of themselves as losers with the new factory to be built up. But Hari, being intelligent enough to learn and adapt to the societal changes in the context of rapid urbanization, doesn't worry at all. He learns the art of mending watches under the kind apprenticeship of Mr. Panwallah. Having gained a new and commercially valuable skill, now Hari is capable of venturing into the untouched field of watch mending in Thul. As thousands of people migrate to Thul to be employed at the coming factories, they will want to repair their watches thus paving the way for Hari to become a rich man. He further wishes to start a poultry farm which will provide him with an extra living.

It is Mr. Panwallah and Sayyid Ali Sahib who teach Hari to shape his life according to the changing modes of the world. In fact, Hari would have happened to remain a frog in the well "if the shop next door had not proved friendlier" (Desai 94). Mr. Panwallah advises Hari that if a person is unable to suppress the changes from happening he must possess the ability to move with them. Mr. Sayyid Ali emphasizes this message in a vibrant manner by bringing out a really workable example. He says that a few years ago, the jungles where the birds like sparrows and pigeons lived were destroyed under the process of industrialization. Then, the birds who were threatened with nowhere to live, migrated to the cities and started depending on the leftovers of the people. This indeed is a remarkable example for the theme of survival accompanied by adaptation.

The inevitability of the changes in a revolutionary world is also brought to focus through the novel. No one is strong enough to prevent them from happening except adapting to them. The world never halts a single minute for us, and hence we have to move with it. Anybody who goes out of the track will fail. Mr. Panwallah stresses on the changeability of the world as he says,

"Things can change all the time, boy – nothing remains the same. When our earth was covered with water, all creatures lived in it and swam. When the water subsided and land appeared, the sea creatures crawled out and learnt to breathe and walk on land. When plants grew into trees, they learned to climb them. When there were

not enough plants left to eat, they learnt to hunt and kill for food. Don't think that is how things have remained. No, boy, they are still changing – they will go on changing – and if you want to survive, you will have to change too. The wheel turns and turns and turns: it never stops and stands still." (Desai 129)

Thus the writer substantiates the fact that change is inevitable and the sole need is to make our guns ready to face the changing textures of the world.

Desai uses the character portrayal of Biju who is the most affluent person in Thul in order to further consolidate the significance of adaptation and survival. Apart from him no one in the village seems to be aware of the need to adhere to the changing faces of the world. They prefer to live as the traditional farmers or fishermen. But, Biju constantly tries to upgrade his business through his timely adherence to the miscellaneous changing patterns of the commercial world. His new engine boat is equipped with a deep freezer too. Unlike the poor boats of the other villagers, which he refers to as "little matchstick boats" (Desai 124), Biju's will provide him with the ability to go far out of the sea and catch fish for several days with the help of the diesel engine and refrigeration facilities of the new boat. Biju cleverly makes use of the loss of a few fishermen at sea during the monsoonal rains to demonstrate the value and the grand nature of his boat. It is depicted that almost all the farmers and fishermen of Thul are very much bothered about the forthcoming threat to their livelihood which is a consequence of the urbanization process. But, Biju has no need to repent because he knows that at least he can sail into the distant sea, if the fish living near the sea shoal of Thul are to be killed by the chemical substances emitted from the coming factories. It is hence clear that Biju will not happen to destabilize his position under the impending circumstances. He seems to have an optimistic view regarding the development process as he declares "Things have to change. Then they will improve. Yes, Improve! Change!" (Desai 124). Success through innovation is perceivable in his character as it is obvious that the secret of his progress is his flexibility and innovative thinking.

In addition, Desai effectively investigates the overall poverty of the lower classes in the society through the novel under discussion. A majority of the people in Thul live ghastly lives of abject poverty which has a tremendous impact on their lives. The underprivileged circumstances in which the poor people in remote areas live, are exceptionally brought forth through the story of Hari's family. Their hut is in need of being re-thatched and it is about to fall down. They are extremely suffering from the disastrous and disintegrating effects of poverty such as limited resources, lack of options, ignorance, malnutrition, and scarcity of nourishment and mental care. Hari and his sisters are not in possession of even a proper dwelling place. They don't get a breakfast and in place of a meal they drink only a cup of tea in the morning. Their lunch and dinner consist of a few dried *chapatis*. Lack of nourishment and malnutrition due to which the poor suffer is profoundly depicted through the pauper meals of Hari's family. Their mother's TB and anemia are due to starvation and their poor sanitary condition. She who herself is lying "like a crumpled grey rag" (Desai 10) represents the victims of lack of medical care. Lila and Hari have stopped schooling. Lack of education too is an ill consequence of penury. They have only an occasional income that Hari earns by selling coconuts. So, it is clear that the dearth of options and limited resources of Hari's family representing those of a thousand poor lives point out that the penurious masses are insecure due to severe instability.

Not merely the people in the village but also most of those in the city suffer from the adverse effects of poverty. Cross lights are thrown on the economic hardships of the poor urban dweller through the reference to the *zopadpatti* where people like Jagu live. The writer creates an awfully pathetic picture when she says,

All the rain and slush and mud from outside had crept in the door and through the cracks in the walls and the ceiling as well. In fact, the mud floor was awash with rain water and debris it brought along. Jagu's family was huddled on a string bed as if it were a raft. (Desai 115 – 116)

Even though Jagu owns an eating house, he lives in a shanty made out of tin cans, plastic pieces and rags because the rents of even the smallest and poorest flats are extremely high. Desai substantiates the insecurity and the uncomfortable nature of their dwelling places as she creates a robust image of the shacks that seem to be "coming loose and sliding into the choked gutter that separated the *zopadpatti* from the street" (Desai 115). It is also revealed that poverty leads to drunkenness and broken relationships. The following lines uttered by Jagu's wife out of sheer helplessness imply this in a really poignant manner.

"As if I can stop you. That's all you want – to go to your toddy shop. All you want from me is an excuse. What do I care if you go and poison yourself? Go kill yourself with the poisons the shops sell you – I will come and laugh at your funeral. I will take the children home to the village so we can starve in the fields and let the vultures pick our bones..." (Desai 116 – 117)

She speaks in an angry voice mixed with frustration and hopelessness. Her words appeal to the common people while revealing the sadness and deprivation experienced by the poor. Poverty has swallowed the blissful lives of the people while making them the most vulnerable and depressing section of the community. Having no way out of their increasing poverty, they are destined to live a hand to mouth existence and are unstable and insecure. Desai's preoccupation with the common people becomes clear from her keen observation of the life of the poor both in the city and the village.

Moreover, the fact that Jagu has several children is effectively disclosed as the writer describes how "several pairs of eyes peered" (Desai 116) at Hari when he entered Jagu's house. Here, the novelist highlights another significant aspect of her thematic concerns – the lack of awareness among the people regarding proper family planning methods which is a major issue that has been affecting many countries in the world. Raising a child is a great process which makes the parents responsible for providing him with shelter, food, clothing, medical care and education. A child who lacks in such privileges is more likely to experience

both mental and physical health issues, lower educational attainment and behavioural problems not just in their childhood but in their teen years too. In a context where the prices of goods and services are rapidly increasing, a poor family who lives in extreme conditions is not stable enough to meet the rising demands of many children. It is hence apparent that due to the lack of knowledge and access to effective methods of family planning, people like Jagu are faced with a long term issue that badly impacts their family life and financial situation.

Another prominent theme conveyed through the novel is the helplessness that the innocent children have to undergo at the neglect of parental responsibilities. Being chronically ill and confined to bed, Hari's mother is not capable of supporting her family. Also, Hari's father is a notorious drunkard in the village who never attends to the needs of his poor children and sick wife except aggravating the situation. It is even more pathetic that his family is badly threatened by the alcohol vendors due to the mounting debts incurred by him for buying alcohol. Consequently, Lila and Hari have stopped schooling and their mother's condition is becoming acute. If Hari's father was a responsible person, his family would never undergo such a wretched fate. Thus, the writer successfully examines the detrimental impact of drunkenness on the lives of the children and how it paves the way for negative relationships, broken families and waste of money.

As is identified by Professor G. Vaidyanathan in his book, *The Village by the Sea: A Critical Study*, one very significant theme that is brought to discussion through the novel is the inherent goodness of people. Desai portrays this feature mainly through the character of Mr. Panwallah whom she appreciates as "a benefactor, the kindest and most helpful of all" (Desai 107). In addition, the de Silvas, Jagu, Mr. Syyid Ali and Hira Lal serve as the symbols of loving kindness and compassion in the novel. Mr. Panwallah, the owner of Ding Dong Watchworks is the most kind hearted and benevolent of all. He loves and sympathizes with children like Hari. He is very respectful and refined so that he sets a good example to Hari and is

always like a father to him. He often directs Hari on the correct path by moulding the traits of his personality. He is modest enough to share his art of watch mending with Hari who is a simple and poor village boy. Mr. Panwallah stands for universal love also. It is due to the kind gesture of Hira Lal, the watchman of Seabird that Hari safely goes into the hand of a good person like Jagu who assists Hari by offering him with a job in his eating house. So, it is clear that both Hira Lal and Jagu also are very merciful.

If it not for the de Silvas, Lila's mother will pitifully face an untimely death. Being generous and good hearted, Mr. de Silva takes Lila's mother to the hospital at Alibagh by his car and pays for her medicine as well as for the running of Lila's family. The way he explains Lila the worsening condition of her mother seems very touching and understanding. He further extends a helping hand to Lila by arranging his friend, Mr. Sayyid Ali who is a bird watcher to stay at Mon Repos. Luckily for Lila, Mr. Sayyid Ali is also a very tender hearted person who pays the three sisters generously for running errands for him. It is therefore clear that all of them are symbolical of love, affection and humanity. Thus, Desai showcases how such commendable human characteristics can serve as a blessing for the betterment of the society.

Also, it is in a very effective manner that Desai reports the fearful atmosphere of the city through the character portrayals of Billu, the beggar and the coconut seller. The beggar says that Billu is very dangerous and delinquent though he acts as a person who sells coconuts by day. Paradoxically, the beggar also seems to be engaged in anti-social activities. What both of them do during the day is just a cover to their criminal activities at night. The people in the city cannot exist on the meagre income earned by just selling coconuts or begging alms since the cost of living in towns is very high. Once they find it difficult to bear up starvation, they tend to steal or murder with which to make a living. Therefore, some people tend to make money by indulging in underhand dealings and criminal activities, while leading a double life which will protect them from the authorities. It is hence

perceived that poverty drives people to be violent and resort to criminal acts.

The injustice caused by the unscrupulous industrialists and politicians to the innocent people is another important dimension of Desai's thematic concerns in the novel. A factory is to be built up in Thul which will grab both the livelihoods of farming and fishing from the hands of the poor villagers. So, they get together and organize a protest campaign to go to Bombay in order to forward a petition to the Chief Minister. But, unfortunately all their efforts are in vain owing to the intervention of the self-serving politicians. They never ever hesitate to hinder the poor people in the pursuit of their petty selfish desires. The poor are so helpless that they are not strong enough even to raise their voice against the injustices caused to them. They have always retreated before the powerful entrepreneurs and politicians just as "the mist of the mountain runs before the morning sun".

In many instances of the novel, Desai invites our attention towards the customs, taboos, beliefs and superstitions of the Indian culture. Hari is greatly worried by the problem of earning dowries for his sisters. It is the Indians who are said to be the first people in the world to demand a dowry from the bride's parents. This is a practice which has been deep rooted in the Indian culture for centuries. Also, early in the morning, almost every woman in Thul goes to the cluster of the three rocks at the beach to offer *kum kum* powder and flowers to the sea god. They are of the belief that it is only if they venerate the sea god that their fishermen are able to be safe at the sea. Superstitions play a major role in their lives. This is clearly manifested through the character of the medicine man or the village quack who himself is a product of the mythical beliefs and ignorance prevailing among the villagers. The efforts made by the quack quite meaninglessly to cure Lila's mother and the unhygienic, nonsensical and atrocious nature of his medicine indicate that superstitions are only a matter of old age beliefs. Religion is also a vital part of the life of the people hailing from both remote and urban areas in India. Even Bombay people celebrate festivals like Diwali, Coconut Day and perform pujas to the god. The religiosity of Indian people is well conveyed through

such situations. It is thus obvious that Desai's attempts to represent the cultural life of India seem to have become successful.

In the present novel, Desai also goes onto explore the impact of industrialization and urbanization on the society and environment of the country. It is almost inevitable that under the pervasive influence of industrialization, the society gets widely exposed to the phenomena of modernization, globalization and commercialization. Thus the writer examines the plight of the rustic people in the rapid context of industrialization as she explains how the people in Thul consider the coming factory as a threat to their livelihood. Another significant aspect of this phenomenon of industrialization is the devastating impact that it has on the ecology of the country. To open up communication lines and put up factories, the land is devastated in an indiscriminate manner. Natural habitats are being destroyed, degraded and depleted senselessly thus causing the loss of wild species including valuable flora and fauna. The once lush forests are now fast disappearing from the face of the earth. It is the self-seeking entrepreneurs and power hungry politicians who cause such destruction to nature with the intention of feathering their own nest. To point out the detrimental consequences of industrialization, the writer makes use of the vivid comparison between the highly industrialized city, Bombay and the unspoilt village, Thul which is brimming with the breathtaking beauty of nature.

Desai very vividly brings to our limelight the aggressive disturbances of modern urban life marked with its enormous artificialities. The incessant sounds coming from factories, honking of horns, and the rubbing, squeaking and cracking sounds of the machineries penetrate through the ears. Desai further discusses the obstructing nature of the city as follows,

But here there was everything at once as if all the traffic in the world had met on the streets of Bombay – cycles, rickshaws, hand-carts, tongas, buses, cars, taxis and lorries – hooting and screeching and grinding and roaring past and around him. (Desai 74)

In the above lines, the writer in an extremely brilliant manner paints out a strong picture of the interferences of the city life. At first, Hari finds it very difficult to get used to the life of Bombay because he has been familiar with a rustic life so far.

Thul, still untouched by the streak of industrial strategies is an extremely beautiful village which has no deficiency of the priceless assets of nature. Thul is a tranquil hamlet where man and nature cherish their relationship with the lush paddy fields, calm waters, dense forests, and the vast stretching majestic sea belt thereby capturing the harmony along the many footpaths. While living in this serene locality one can derive pleasure by experiencing the delicacy of natural objects and listening to the melodious songs of the wild birds. This natural magnificence and tranquility of Thul contrasts with the artificialities of urban life.

The beauty of nature also emerges as an enticing theme of Desai's novel. She seems to be entrapped by the serenity of nature at the very beginning of the novel where she excellently captures the spectacular scenery of the sandy shore, fragrant flowers and the colourful birds.

Then there were all the birds flying out of the shadowy, soft-needled casuarina trees and the thick jungle of pandanus, singing and calling and whistling louder than at any other time of the day. Flute-voiced drongoes swooped and cut through the air... It was the voice of the village Thul as much as the roar of the waves and the wind in the palms. (Desai 9)

In the above paragraph quoted from the first chapter of the novel, the writer gives a colourful image of the village Thul which is undoubtedly a blessing of nature. The stunning dance of the fragrant flowers caught in the wind is very attractive. The reader is heartened by the beauty of the "zebra-striped butterflies". The loveliest is the birds flying here and there while cutting through the air like "dazzling knives". The mellifluous chirping of the birds adds a musical rhythm to the dance of their sisters who are the flowers and butterflies. It is striking that lovely nature has lavishly gifted Thul with all these incomparable treasures of tranquil

elegance. The very title of the novel, *The Village by the Sea* also sounds close to nature. Desai's redolent pictures of the sky in the monsoon and in the evening as well as the giant sea stretching up to the horizon are also really exceptional. Thus, she appears to be an ardent lover of nature. However, there may not be any debate for the fact that Desai's beautiful portraits of nature outshine those of a great poet.

Thus, the thematic appeal of the novel, *The Village by the Sea* is very intriguing, touching and vital. Its themes carry immense importance highlighting the most critical issues pertaining to the miscellaneous layers of the social pyramid. Desai's acute sense of observation and strong powers of imagination become prominent in her masterly characterization, vivid descriptions of the settings and her fine organization of a pulsating plot which sounds highly authentic. Also, the novelist's remarkable ability in the adoption of effective narrative techniques seems to have been immensely helpful in enhancing the richness of the thematic appeal of the novel. So, it is quite evident that this exquisite work of literature explicitly exhibits Anita Desai's excellence and workmanship as a writer of fiction.

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