

Ecological Awareness in Anita Desai's *Village by the Sea*

Sweta Chandranath Jha

Introduction

Currently we are living in the world of ecological crisis. Earth is becoming more difficult and hostile place to any form of life on account of the destruction and disturbance of environment and natural resources. To face this global challenge, literature is also playing vital role since long back. Many writers have depicted the problems of ecology in their works and the separate theory of Ecocriticism has been also emerged to study the ecological concerns in literature. Ecocriticism is also known as Green studies, Eco poetics, Social ecology etc. “simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). The study and scope of Ecocriticism is getting broaden day by day. As Greg Garrard opines:

“Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology. Ecocritics may not be qualified to contribute to debates about problems in ecology, but they must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ‘ecological literacy’ as far as possible” (5).

Anita Desai holds a significant position among Indian English writers. Desai is primarily known for depiction of psychological aspects and portrayal of females in her novels. She induces her characters and moods through visual images. She paints harsh reality and tragic view of life in her novels. Moreover, Anita Desai is a strong advocator of nature. She equally shows her concerns for females and nature in her novels. She depicts ecology and problems of ecology in her work by one or the other way. Her novels include description of nature,

exploitation of natural resources, use of imagery that ranges from meteorological to botanical which suggest her deep concern for ecology. Anita Desai was born in Mussoorie- the queen of hills and she is basically a nature lover person at heart. She strongly believes that the attitude of humans is responsible for the destruction of nature and disturbance in ecology.

Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* is a children story that moves around the lives of two characters Hari and Lila who are brother and sister and lives in poverty. The setting of the story is a place called Thul, a village near Alibaugh, western coast of India. Thul is a small village with lush green surroundings, natural beauty and fascinating sea shore. The serene natural beauty of Thul makes it a very peaceful village. In contrast to this natural place, she switches over to urban setting for half of the story as the protagonist Hari shifts to Bombay for some time to find a job.

By describing natural beauty and other living beings like animals and birds of Thul, Desai wants to show that the men are blessed in true sense when they are living harmoniously with nature and other living beings. The natural beauty of Thul gives a calmness and satisfaction to those who are living there. Poor and rich equally finds tranquility with nature. Natural resources of Thul are also helpful to people for livelihood. As Biju says that “. . . there is plenty of food anyway-paddy and vegetables and coconuts . . . The coconuts are so big and sweet; they sell for good money in Bombay. The land is so good; we grow two crops in a year. We have the best paddy” (Desai 91). For many villagers Fishing is the medium of earnings as Thul is situated at coast line. All these emphasizes on essentiality of protecting nature and natural resources in Thul; but as the story moves further, it is shown that these natural beauty and natural resources are at the risk due to the urbanization and industrial development. It is planned to establish a Fertilizer Project at Thul. It is clear threat for the ecology of Thul. Poor villagers of Thul are ignorant about the calamity which will be brought by this project. They even do not know the meaning of the word ‘Fertilizer’. Hari himself take it as ‘Manure’

Anita Desai never misses any opportunity to paint vividness of nature and its soft and harsh aspects. As she describes the damage caused by the storm of monsoon in Thul. "Early that morning the greatest storm of that monsoon broke. At times it seemed that their hut would be blown to splinters. Lila feared that one of the coconut trees would fall upon their roof. The water in the creek rose minute by minute, turning what had been a marsh in to a lake (201). Moreover, Biju informs the fishermen not to sail the sea but they ignore him and go for sailing. After that three boat sink and three fishermen lose their lives due to the storm. It shows the ecological disturbance.

Desai's characters are advocators of ecology. It is reflected at the different point of time in the novel. The protagonist Hari gets shock when Ramu tells him about the new development in Thul. Ramu tells Hari, "'The Government is going to build a great factory here. Many factories, hundreds of them" (11). Hari is deeply concerned and asks Ramu, "And what will happen to the hill and the temple on top?" (12). Hari was worried about his village and people when the stranger tells them the government will take the land and the factories will be built in Thul. At that time, Biju gets extremely angry and tells the stranger, "No one can take our land.... It is ours, and we will not sell" (91). Biju adds, "GO build your factories where the land is barren and nothing grows but stones and thorns." (92). At the same time, Desai paints the character like stranger (a person appointed by government) who is hardly concerned with protection of nature and neglects damage that is caused to nature and is strong supportive of industrial development. This character represents the selfish nature of modern men who neglects nature for the sake of urbanization. When Biju asks the stranger, "And what about us who already live here?" (93). 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" (93). To protest him, Biju says, "You mean these boys are to give up their fathers' land and boats and go to work in factories like city people?" (93). The stranger tells him that in factories the engineers will come to operate machines. It mirrors that the hunger

for urbanization and industrial development ruins not only ecology but also the life of local people and eats up their family-owned business.

Desai has also underlined one more character, youngman from Alibaugh, who understand this very well and tries to create awareness among the villagers of Thul. He advises the villagers of Thul to unite and oppose the government's determination to build the factories on the cultivable land. The young man makes aware the villagers by saying, "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?" (95). He also alerts the Thul villagers about the hidden intentions of government and says that to acquire their land the government is tempting them by offering job but actually the government will recruit only trained engineers in the factory. The youngman also informs the villagers that he tried to oppose and inform government officials but he and his other members were driven away by police. So they decided to take out protest march at chief minister office.

As a result of this, Hari and the group of farmers reaches to Bombay. Desai introduces an elderly man with white beard of Bombay, one more proponent of ecology, who leads them and says, "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 . . ." (120). Moreover, he furnishes the reasons of supporting them by saying, "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." (121) He informs that as per the ruling government instructions, no fertilizer complex should be located within fifty miles of big cities but Rewas and Thul are close to Bombay. He adds, "Bombay is heavily industrialized, crowded, and polluted. How much more pollution can we stand?" (121). He also shares one eye-opening incident occurred in

Japan due to ecological damage, he says that organic mercury was pumped into the sea, it poisoned the fish and the fish poisoned the people who were unlucky enough to eat them. In addition to this, Sayyid Ali, one more supporter is also worried about the issue and says the Alibugh geomagnetic observatory is only one of its kind and if the factories will be established than it will stop working. When Hari returns at his home from Bombay, his conversations with bird watcher Sayyid Ali Sahib is very suggestive. Sayyid Ali Sahib says, "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 licenses in the name of progress. Thul is lost. . ." (254). It is last blow, when he 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" (255). Hari asks him, "Why do you care so much about the birds, sir?" (255). He replies, "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" (255). It demonstrates that the hunger for industrialization and urbanization has made human blind who is not able to see that how much damage is caused to nature. If some people are concerned for the ecology and fight to save the nature then they hardly succeed in it as powerful politicians, corrupted officials and selfish industrialists stop them for their own selfish interests. The novel emphasizes to open eyes for environmental issues.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that Desai's *The village by the Sea* is an influential novel that emphasizes protecting ecology and sustainable development. The present paper has attempted to show that Desai has highlighted ecological concerns in the novels by portraying different characters who are strong advocates of ecology. It makes men aware

that if human will not think about nature and natural resources for the sake of urbanization then it will cause damage in all aspects. The novel shows red signal to industrial and technological development if it is on the cost of ecology.

Works Cited

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