

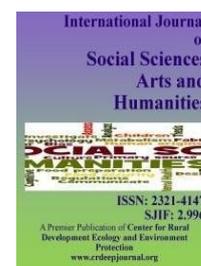
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Review Paper

A Study of Rural Consciousness in Anita Desai's Novel: *The Village by the Sea*Nilofar Akhtar¹ and Nazish Khan^{2*}

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ABSTRACT

India is mainly a country of villages, inhabited by various cultural communities. Village consciousness that exists in a village. Anita Desai's critically acclaimed novel, *The Village by the Sea* deftly explores the rich layers of village consciousness. It refers to the awareness about the life of people living in rural areas. Their life is quite different from city life. Though villages are such places where natural beauty is present, yet the present condition of the villagers is gloomy and pathetic. They have no basic amenities and spend their life in darkness and abject poverty. They are not aware about changing scenario. The callous attitude for women is also present in the men. The novelist expresses her deep feelings and emotions about village life. The protagonists of this novel Hari and Lila survive against all odds. Their ability to adapt in trying circumstances highlights the steely resolve of typical villagers in India. The customs and taboos which continue to grip the ruler population are minutely described. The village Thul, which is situated fourteen kilometers away from the hustle bustle of Bombay, provides an ideal setting of the novel. The proximity of the village with the big city Bombay, however, does not create a sense of awareness particularly for Hari and Lila's family. The typical challenges of the 1980s Indian villages as unplanned families, ill-informed government schemes continue to haunt the characters of the novel. It explores the extreme complexities of rural people. The present paper will try to situate the typical features of village consciousness in the novel- *The Village by the Sea*.

Anita Desai has spent her first part of life in India. She is very well aware about the village life that is why in the present novel she delineates the miserable conditions of those inhabiting villages. Her description of nature is poetic and magnificent. However, this extremely vivid description also has a deep rooted connect with the complexities of rural life.

She describes it thus:

The birds are the last free creatures on the earth; everything else has been captivated, tamed and enslaved. (VS06)

The two protagonists, Hari and Lila face so many difficulties in their lives. Hari of twelve is the only son in the family. He has an elder sister of thirteen and two younger sisters, Bela and Kamal. His mother is a bedridden patient of tuberculosis while their father is an irresponsible person given to drinking. Hari and Lila take up the financial as well as the domestic burden of their family at the very tender age. Through the characters of Hari and Lila, Desai explores the willingness of rural people to adjust in difficult circumstances. He does not look after us, we look after ourselves, can't we? (VS,15)

Basically, the children at the age of Hari and Lila are more adventurous, mischievous and playful; they roam uselessly, but not Hari and Lila. They struggle to pull their family out from dark poverty. In spite of such a young boy, Hari knows his responsibilities regarding his poor family:

He could not afford dreams; he must be a practical and think out scheme. That was not easy and the effort made him tired. (VS33)

Being a rustic boy, Hari suffers from the effects of poverty and ignorance. Desai depicts Hari's journey to Bombay and his development that grows from childhood into a certain maturity: Change would not come suddenly or quickly to their home and family, but it would come. (VS17)

Through the characters of Hari and Lila, the novelist emphasizes the theme of survival and adjustment. They always try to adjust in difficult circumstances and never lose hope for the better future of their family. Hari works hard in the fields and sells whatever he can at the market to feed his family:

He saw now that there were two or three responsibilities. Even if all he could do now was to fish and sell coconuts, later on he would be able to choose between a factory job, a job on a big fishing boat like Biju or a job in Bombay if someone helped him (VS35)

When Hari finds out that his income is too little to survive his family, so he decides to go to Bombay in search of a good job to earn more money:

He would have to make a choice, no one else in the village had made before. How? Who would help him? Walked along silently, worrying. (VS35)

Hari faces several challenges and difficulties in Bombay. The feeling of alienation haunts him. He works hard to eliminate the social and economic marginalization. Desai describes how things are quite different in the cities than what they are in the villages. Hari meets Mr Panwalla who is a very kind-hearted person and gets him employed in Jagu's eating-house. With the help of Mr Panwalla Hari learns how to mend and how to face changes in life boldly:

Good! Cried Mr Panwalla; that's what I want to hear you say, learn, learn, learn so that you can grow and change all the time, boy, nothing remains the same. (VS129)

Besides Hari, Jagu is also a poor villager, who lives in a shack in Bombay. His financial condition is not good. When Hari drenched in the rain and becomes ill so that Jagu takes him to his shack, for the arrival of an unwanted guest his wife curses him. She speaks in an angry voice mixed with frustration and helplessness:

I will take the children to the village, so we can starve in fields and let the vultures pick our bones. (VS116)

Jagu reacts in an irritated mood:

Be quiet, get my dinner and bring an extra plate for the boy. He is ill, I am taking him to the dispensary for medicine tomorrow. (VS116)

The Village By the Sea is a poignant attempt of Anita Desai to reveal the sadness and deprivation experienced by the poor. The novelist draws attention to the customs, taboos, beliefs and superstitions which are religiously followed in the villages. The novel also questions the social evils like the dowry system which is long and deep-rooted in the Indian social system. Hari is worried about the dowry for his sisters. Besides it, superstitions play a major role in the lives of the villagers. Every woman in the village of Thul goes to cluster the tree rocks on the beach to offer Kumkum powder to the Sea-God, they have such belief that if they perform this duty, their fishermen will return safely from their voyages.

There are many communities in the village who do not welcome the birth of a girl child. They treat women as mere commodities – things having no individuality, identity and status of their own. Through the character of Lila, Desai effectively explores the significance of a girl child in the family as she cooks for the family and cleans their mess. Lila is the most appealing character of the novel. She remains optimistic and struggles along with Hari to sustain her family. She has the maturity of an adult at the age of thirteen. She accepts the challenges of life with strong determination and patience:

It was quite cheap cotton sari, but she wore it seldom that it still looked new and fresh. (VS35)

In Hari's absence, she takes up all the domestic as well as financial responsibilities of her family on her little shoulders. Her endurance and family management skills are marvelous. She nurses her bed-confined mother and tries her utmost efforts to reform her alcoholic father. She works outside with Mr. De Salvas and Sayid Ali to earn money through which she sustains her family.

Desai deftly emphasizes the necessity of education in rural areas. The majority of the Indian people live in villages, but regrettably the villagers are not aware about the importance of literacy and education. Most of the villagers remain hard-pressed for money which yields to a lot of challenges in their lives. Small kids of school-going age are engaged in farming and other activities leaving schooling at an early age. Many of them unwillingly stop going to school as they aren't able to pay off their school fee. As Hari and Lila stop going to school, they still want their younger kids to continue schooling. Watching them, Hari thought of his sisters, Bela and Kamal in their indigo blue skirts, skipping and running down the village road to the school by the hill and wondered. (VS106)

Thus, in the present novel, the village by the sea the consciousness of the novelist about the village life is very intriguing, touching and vital, which is of prominence, highlighting the most critical issues pertaining to the social problems of the rural life. The sense of observation and strong power of imagination of Anita Desai becomes obvious in her characterization. Her characters, Hari and Lila are the mirror of the rural life as through these characters, the novelist expresses her eminent sense of village consciousness.

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