

Concern of Survival in Desai's the Village by the Sea

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Abstract: Anita Desai's first novel for children *The Village By The Sea* which received the British Guardian Children's Fiction award in 1982 raises the issue of survival in the village 'Thul'-- located on the Western coast of India. The question raised by the author is of earning one's living by the farmers and fishermen in a village which is beside the sea. Even after 30 years of writing this fiction, the scene has not changed for India, the fate of the poor remains the same. The saying rightly implies here that Indian farmers are born in debt, live in debt, and die in debt. The chief reason depicted is of their addiction to drinking toddy and lying drunk under the coconut trees. In this novel, Lila- the main protagonist shows her courage and perseverance to cope amidst misery. Hari, the only brother of three sisters, craves to go to Bombay to earn his livelihood. The force which drives him to run away from his village is penury and misery. But the story ends on an optimistic note reflected by the hope and aspirations of the protagonists soaring high. Desai also portrays the orthodox beliefs of the people which is typical of Indian living. Though the plot does not seem to be unusual, it attracts the readers by its vivid description of the characters and beauty of the nature. But it can be said that the addition of the regional languages would have added to its aesthetic sense.

The story 'The Village by the Sea' starts with the cultural reflection of the people of Thul and ends on the same note:

It was the sacred rock, a kind of temple in the sea.... Lila took the flowers from her basket and scattered them about the rock, then folded her hands and bowed(Desai,2).

At the end of the novel, Hari sees a group of women coming down the path who are carrying small baskets of flower to show their faith in the three rocks in the sea:

He watched them wade into the peacock blue and green sea, the foam breaking against their ankles, to scatter flower petals and coloured powder on the rocks as they prayed to the sea. He saw that his mother was amongst them(Desai,260).

The author leaves it on the readers to deduce on these beliefs and feels that there was no reason for the villagers to pray a particular rock as it was similar to other rocks. Desai beautifully portrays the nature and describes the morning light as a soft one, that filters through the web of palm leaves and mingles with the wood-smoke that rose from the fires in hidden-huts. Her love for nature can also be seen in her description of the butterflies:

... large zebra-striped ones with a faint tinge of blue to their wings, showy black ones with scarlet-tipped wings, showy black ones with scarlet-tipped wings, and little sulphur-yellow ones that fluttered about in twos and threes(Desai,4).

Desai beautifully depicts the life of the villagers--the farmers and fishermen, residing beside the sea--offering them the main source of livelihood. The arrival of the boats at the shore brought happiness on their faces:

Now all was loud and noisy on the beach....The fishermen began to auction off the baskets of fish. The women poked into them and spilled out the contents on to the sand. There were mounds of pink prawns..., little flat shining pomfrets..., some blue-black speckled surmai..., and a few large black crabs. The women became louder and noisier as they fought over the baskets, pushing each other out of the way as they bid for the catch(Desai,27).

Anita displays the singing of the birds to console and optimize the situation for Lila. She calls the 'coop-coop-coop' of the crow-pheasant, the 'coo-coo' of the pigeon as the voice of the village 'Thul' to symbolize tranquility and calmness which consoles her by conveying that all would be well in coming days. Lila knew that nothing was well with her family. They were unable to make their ends meet. Their hut had palm leaves which were dry and tattered, and the earthen walls were crumbling. Moreover no smoke came out of their hut as there was nothing to be cooked. The mother was bed-ridden and the father was permanently drunk. Even the dog Pinto who gave them consolation at adverse times, was killed by their envious neighbour, who fed him with poison.

Lila knew their reality. They ate only dry bread, or dry rice everyday. Unless they sold coconuts to the Malabar, they could not buy anything from the bazaar. They could not afford medicines for their mother nor

could fish as their father did not go fishing. Lila had given up school long ago and stayed at home, did marketing, cooking, and washing. Lila undertakes responsibility as a mother and takes care of her two sisters--Bela and Kamal.. Hari--the brother of three sisters, helps in household obligation by working in the fields. An optimistic note is also conveyed by the village boy Ramu who tells Hari that a factory would be constructed by the government in the village which would enable them to get job: " We'll get jobs, Hari--We'll get jobs. You'll see"(Desai,13). Lila still retained her hope if Hari got a job in a factory in Bombay, the things would change.

Desai portrays the pessimistic thought which always creeps into an individual even one tries to be hopeful, which is so much a feature of a human character. Hari stares at the dry, stony field where he had to plant the vegetables and then negative thought suddenly creeps into his mind, and he wonders if after sowing the crops, it gets eaten up. His hands were the worker's hands--square and brown and rough that made him realise that his hands were suitable to work in a factory, may be in at Bombay, which seemed to be a foolish dream as it involved too much risk:

Bombay! He stared out of the window at the stars that shone in the sky and wondered if the lights of the city could be as bright, or brighter. It was a rich city: if he could get there, he might be able to make money, bring home riches, pieces of gold and silver with which to dazzle his sisters(Desai,45).

Desai portrays the change which should come into the mindset of an individual, even if one tends to feel that everyone ridicules the change in the beginning. It is gradually, that one adapts to the change. The village boys scream on seeing the fancy motor which stuck in the sand. They mocked by saying that a bullock cart would be better option than the lorry. Similarly, when Biju's new engine boat made up of timber is built, every villager feels that he was befooling them. They could not accept the idea of a refrigerator being used in the boat for keeping the catch in a deep freeze. It is when Hari goes to Bombay aspiring to work in a factory, he realizes that change is indispensable. When finally Hari comes back to Thul, he is able to co-relate Mr. Panwallah's words with Sayyid Ali Sahib that, "The wheel turns and turns and turns..., and how birds and men were united in this great turning of the wheel, and how the birds, if we understood them, could show us and teach us many important things (Desai, 257-258).The author keeps the readers engrossed in the fiction because of its imagery: Sari which was always either dark green or dark purple, a single unpatterned colour.... The whole sea glittered with reflected light--it was like a mirror broken into bits and shining(Desai, 35-36).

It was de Silvas at the Mon Repos who made Hari perceive an idea of visiting Bombay for a job. To get rid of the agonies of his household, he decided to leave Thul for getting a job in Bombay:

Everything belonged here, everything blended together--except for himself.With his discontent, his worries and his restlessness, he could not settle down to belonging. He knew in his heart that he would leave one day. Thul could not hold him for long--at least not the Thul of the coconut groves and the fishing fleet(Desai,60).

But what Hari saw at Bombay was in contrast to his dreams. He thought only of one side of a coin. For him Bombay would be a great city, a crowded city where people had jobs and made fortunes. Hari could not think of the penury and the plight of the people in a big city. He meets Jagu-- the owner of The Sri Krishna Eating House, the shabbiest and the cheapest restaurant Hari had ever seen:

... under the layers and layers of grime and soot with which the walls were coated. The ceiling was thick with cobwebs that trapped the soot and made a kind of furry blanket over one's head. The floor and the wooden tables were all black, too...(Desai,146).

Hari started earning a rupee a day as a reward of his miserable life he leads at the restaurant. He kneaded great hills of dough, and carried out the order of the customers. Hari suffered terribly with the coming of the monsoons. He had no escape from the kitchen and the eating house, could neither go to the watchshop nor to the park. He felt like a prisoner who got locked up in Sri Krishna Eating House. But even when he got an offer from Jagu to accompany him to his dismal shack, it added to his agony. His vision of living in a big metro city got shattered.The readers get to see the life at the zopadpattis in Bombay through the eyes of Hari.When he is taken out by Jagu to his dilapidated house, he is utterly shocked. He lived in a structure which Hari had never seen. It was made of tin and can, rags, and plastic sheets.The mud entered the house along with the debris. Hari slept on a wooden bench surrounded by pots, pans,boxes and bundles of rags. His felt miserable.

It was Mr. Panwallah--the owner of the Ding Dong Watchworks who gave some hope and happiness to Hari who offered him apprenticeship. On one hand, the readers are touched by the hardwork of Hari who saves every penny for his family at Thul and also for Lila who inThul earns money for the family by serving de Silvas whose bungalow was next to their hut. Lila has been shown as quite decisive who requests de Silvas to take her mother to the hospital at Alibagh where she gets admitted for treatment of anaemia. This decision of hers brings about a radical change in their father who becomes a teetotaller.

When Hari comes back to Thul in Diwali with the help of Jagu and Mr. Panwallah, with no intention of going back to Bombay, he is a new person with a new vision. He understands the significance of the word 'adapt' used by Sayyid Ali--giving up of a traditional way of living and learning a new way to adopt a new situation.

He feels quite confident of starting a poultry farm--to buy some chickens, build chicken coops in his

field, and sell eggs and chickens to the rich people in the village. He also plans to start a small watch-mending shop in future. He feels himself free and independent like a bird who spreads his wings and soars high in the sky. It seems the perfect weather had come for them--a life full of hope and aspirations.

List of References

- [1]. Desai, Anita. The village by the Sea. London: William Heinemann, 1982, p.2.
- [2]. ---, Ibid, p.260.
- [3]. ---, Ibid, p.4.
- [4]. ---, Ibid, p.27.
- [5]. ---, Ibid, p.13
- [6]. ---, Ibid, p.45.
- [7]. ---, Ibid, p.257-258.
- [8]. ---, Ibid, p.35-36.
- [9]. ---, Ibid, p.60.
- [10]. ---, Ibid, p.146