

## ***THE VILLAGE BY THE SEA: AN ECOCONSCIOUSNESS READING***

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper aims to study, interpret and analyze Ecoconsciousness as it is reflected in the novel The Village By The Sea by Anita Desai. The novel composed of thirteen chapters deals with the village life of peoples in their relationship with the plants and animals. Natural condition and the surrounding environment raise ecoconsciousness. Since time unknown everything is thought of from anthropocentric point of view and at the cost of environment. The presence of nature in literature is as old as our culture. Among many others Anita Desai has given a voice through her characters to the predicament of nature and how it affects the humans in turn. The Village By the Sea is a children novel set in a lush green village Thul by the Arabian coastline nearby Alibagh. The peoples in the village are in harmonious relationship with the nature. A kind of attachment exists between them. As the novel develops novelist reveals the role played by the sea, its palm and coconut tree, plants and animals and the threat posed to it by the fix plan of building a city if factories over the village of lush greenery .*

**Key words:** ecoconsciousness, harmonious relationship, attachment, nature, awareness, environment, ecosensitive.

### **Introduction:**

An Eco-criticism or Green study was begun in the USA in the late 1980s and in UK in the early 1990s. However seeds were laid around some decades ago in Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), and Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975). Cheryll Glotfelty defines 'ecocriticism' as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. He takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty, 1996: xviii) Ecocriticism is an awareness and conscious-raising phenomenon about the environment and nature. To the students of literature, 'ecocriticism is a critical development to spread awareness and consciousness about ecological concerns. Being a multidisciplinary approach it has connections and cross-connections with other disciplines. Numbers of development programmes are being executed not being with ecology, but instead

at the cost of ecology. Ecocriticism as a literary ecological philosophy provides a reliable framework or mechanism to analyze cultural and literary texts which are directly or indirectly preoccupied with ecological concerns and contexts.

Moreover it is concerned with the depictions of natural sights and landscapes along with people's attitudes and attention towards nature. In fact this kind of attempt negotiates between literature and ecology to find the ways in which man-nature relationship exists. The movements like Ecology, The Environment Justice Movement, Earth First!, Ecocriticism etc. are solely intended "to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community in turn. This is what ecologists like to call the self destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude towards nature.

Ecocriticism as a literary and cultural theory is burgeoning since 1990's in Europe and America chiefly. However some critics attribute the birth of the term 'ecocriticism' to US critic William Rueckert's essay "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism*" (1978). By 'ecocriticism' he means the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Jonathan Bate, the first British eco-critic sees 'ecocriticism' as a double stranded approach. The first approach explores human attitudes towards nature; and the second, the relationship between man and nature depicted in various literary texts. Since 1970s a need was continually being felt to give due representation to ecology into literary studies and the result is 'ecocriticism'. A number of equivalents to 'ecocriticism' can be suggested such as 'eco-poetics', 'ecological literature', 'eco-literature', 'environmental literature', 'environmental literary criticism', 'green studies', 'green cultural studies', 'green literature', 'nature writing' so on and so forth. As a literary field of study, it seeks to relate humans to non-human environment. Moreover it evaluates prevalent ideologies towards nature spread over literary and cultural texts. Eco-critics are so enthusiastic that they blur the line between human and non-human world.

Anita Desai, a modern sensibility writer and psychological novelist, has given a considerable space to environment, nature its consciousness and its problems in her writing. The novel *The Village by The Sea* is set in the village Thul. The villagers are living and enjoying their life with all the benefits nature has to offer them. The women start their day with the offering of red kum-kum powder and flowers to the sacred rocks, a kind of temple in the sea, hoping the provides food, fish for them and water for their farm, believing the sea to safeguard their men's lives from drowning. The flutter of various birds, green vegetation, groves of mango and coconut, roaring of waves, open air at the bank, pious cows, devoted dogs, cattles, consoling pigeons coos, great banyan trees, cool breeze of the sea and temple on the hill all are in harmonious relationship with the villagers, a kind of emotional bond has been set up between them. But this is not going to be continued with the advent of technology and industry. The whole village is to be vacated, the green trees to be cut down to widen the roads and lay down the rail track, the fresh air to be polluted with the effluents and the

hazardous chemicals, the bread and butter of people's lives, the means of their lives, to be snatched away, their lands acquired by the government by force, the sea water polluted by the sewage and effluents under the name of progress and developments.

The air and the atmosphere in the village is calm and balmy as it relieves and consoles the peoples and tells them to be happy, all will be well. "It was the voice of the village Thul as much as the roar of the waves and the wind in the palms. It seemed to tell Lila to be calm and happy and all would be well and all would be just as it was before." (Desai 4-5) The above lines show how they are in harmonious relationship with each other. It has a strong impact upon their life and they look towards it as beneficiary. It seems like a fellow being is consoling us in the times of need. It assures them of the wellness, rightness and justness of things around them. Again they use twigs of the neem tree, which has medicinal properties, to brush their teeth. Thus providing them with their daily needs.

But this attachment, it seems, is going to be destroyed by the strange news that Ramu brings about that the government is going to build a great factory in the village. Many factories. Hundreds of them. All the trees will be cut off. The machines like bulldozers, earthmovers and steamrollers will be sent to the village. The names of the machines are worth noting here. Earthmover is the name of machine which is used to move the soil and earth from one place to another. It is very ridiculous thing to name such because How can a man move the earth? Is it in his capabilities to do that? Is it necessary to do that? Will it not have the adverse effects? These questions need to be answered. All this is to be considered seriously and thought over. Nature does supply them their daily needs. The sea itself is great source of their livelihood. The fish are caught along the shore. It is sold in the markets in Mumbai. "They could easily for their fathers owned fishing boats and went out to fish and brought home catches they could sell to the dealers who took them to Bombay in lorries."(Desai 19) The peoples, who own boats could easily buy books, give better education to the children, buy clothes, sell the catches in the market and earn their livelihood. This shows that the sea is directly the source of their living but What if the water of the sea gets polluted due to the factories? The factories are direct threats to the villagers life and the life of plants and animals.

Another line also shows how the sea is a source of their livelihood. "It doesn't matter. Once it is on the sea, it will fetch me fifty thousand rupees a day, at least,'Biju said, proudly. (Desai 46) The new boat is being built with the wood from Alibagh and to answer the question of the villagers, Biju, the rich fisherman and owner of the boat tells them that the expenditure is not a thing of concern for him, because once the boat gets into the sea it will give him fifty thousand and more rupees every day. This is clear that the sea plays a very important role in their life. The village life with its pure and untouched natural conditions and environmental surroundings attracts the city dwellers. The de Silvas, the family from Bombay spend their holidays occasionally in the village. "The de Silvas who were young and energetic and seemed heartily to enjoy life on the beach. Whenever they came, life changed

for the family in the little hut, too. Immediately there was a hubbub, all kinds of excitements and expectations and of course work to be done, employment to be had, and wages. (p49) The novelist, Anita Desai seems concerned about the environmental issues when she tells us that the de Silvas buy a house in the village Thul and visit and enjoy holidays there. The de Silva family from Mumbai buys a house named “*Mon Repos*” for enjoying and spending holidays. The family owns a business firms in Mumbai and abroad and for relaxation and recuperation they come to a house in Thul. The life in Thul gives them comfort and relieves them from the tensions of their city life. The holidays in Thul changes their life from their routine worries and it means something very special to them. The life in Thul gives them a lot of excitement and expectations and the house becomes the centre for the activities. They feel energetic and enjoy heartily in contrast to their worried city life.

But what if the village is changed to the city? Where the people, who come to village from city, will go? Questions like these wait for answers. The Watchman of the hut, where the steel pipes are kept for building of factories, tells heartlessly that it is not one factory to be built, but the whole city will of factories will be built over there. Factories, housing, shops, colonies, bus depots, railway heads, engineers and workers; the whole city is going to be built there. The chemical factories would come up in place of the trees and the chemicals are to be used for farming that compromises with the original quality of the soil. Anita Desai has drawn our attention to the government policies with Biju and the Watchman talk over the factories and the village. Biju tells the Watchman that they will not sell their land, it is their own land. He challenges the Watchman and wants to tell the government to build the factories where there is barren land, where there is no fertile land and not here in their fertile land. To this the Watchman retorts that the government itself has chosen this land for the building of factories. This shows the truth about the government policies. What the common people will do if the government does so? Where will they go?

Anita Desai, who keeps pets and loves them in real life, gives essential part to them to play in her novels also. The two examples from the present novel show her and her characters concern for the little harmless animals. As with her other novels this novel too has a pet animal dog named Pinto. The pet animals like dogs and cats serve man with security and safety. In many families in India and in the countries over the world pets are taken care like the family members. Pinto is such kind of dog, in the family of Hari, the protagonist. The dog is favourite of them and is loved and taken care of by the family members, because he protects the house of Hari and Lila from theft, stray cattles and other stray dogs. Lila’s concern for the dog is reflected in love towards the dog and the care she takes of him. He also follows her wherever she goes and she gives him to eat every day. Her words “give one to Pinto. Poor Pinto.” (*The Village* 55) shows her feelings and concern towards the dog. She tells her young sisters to give the dog the sweets they are eating and feels sorry over the dogs bad time for it has to be kept tied to the tree or Veranda post to stop him from attacking the city dog of the de Silvas. She shows the concern for their family pet dog Pinto. One more

example is a small creature like the poor little Mongoose is chased, captured and killed with a preparation one does for a battle. This makes us think what harm a little creature like mongoose can cause us. The answer or the reason the killers give is that it drinks the water out of their coconuts when they are green and fresh. They say it climbs the tree, makes a small hole in the coconut and drinks all the sweet juice so that the nuts falls down dry.

Desai's novels are stuffed with the description, narration and love of plants and animals. A love and concern of birds is seen through the character of birdwatcher Sayyid Ali, who makes a touching speech at Black Horse square in Mumbai. A white bearded thin man; he is a bird lover, birdwatcher and studies birds. He is love of birds brings him from Mumbai to the village Thul to study birds. He is so engrossed in his observation of birds that he hardly notices any man or villager around him. He has keen eyesight for the birds and can see the small birds hidden in the boughs and branches of the trees, though he wears spectacles on his eyes. Committed to the study of birds and putting the records of birds habits and habitats, he sometimes forgets even to take food. He has his bag full with books and pencils and disappears whole day observing and taking down notes and sketches. The bird lovers, the birdwatchers do valuable contribution to the world of birds. They collect through their observations the minute details about the different types, sizes, shapes, colours, features, characteristics, eating mating habits, feeding, nesting, nurturing, their habits and habitats, and causes of risk and dangers to them. The knowledge they collect and spread proves of invaluable help in preserving, protecting and conserving the various endangered species of birds. The books, journals, magazines, pamphlets, brochures, reports, documentaries, audios, videos, short films, and movies based directly on their studies play a vital role in creating awareness about the birds world. In this regard Sayyid Ali's documentation can be used to stop the government from building a village of factories in the place of birds habitats. Connected with ecoconsciousness ecoaesthetic sense of Lila is revealed, when she sees the beautiful sketches of birds by Sayyid Ali. She tells her sisters to dry wet sheets of paper on which he has drawn the pencil sketches of birds. She appreciates the beauty in sketches of birds and advises her sisters not to spoil even a single sheet of paper while drying the wet sheets of papers. The villagers, who do not take note of the birdwatcher otherwise, also remain wonderstruck when they see his pencil sketches of birds on sheet of papers.

The Anita Desai has driven home a message that, though everyone knows about the serious problems arising out of overpopulation, no one takes it seriously. Through a humble character like bullock cart driver the novelist gives us a message when he agrees with Hari. He says "Nothing is enough. We are too many on the earth now. Not enough fuel for all, not enough food, not enough jobs- or school, or hospital, or trains, buses or houses. Too many people, not enough to go around."(Desai 110) The natural resources are being used beyond the limit so there is scarcity of everything. The population is increasing day by day but the resources are as they were in limited degree.

Ecosensitive Anita Desai, who has written more than a dozen novels, has drawn images from nature in her writing to create the awareness among the mass people. She has a concern for the natural world and has given her voice to the characters in the novel. The novel *The Village By The Sea* has many facets and grounds to be studied from, but eco-critical reading of the novel reveals author's ecoconsciousness and ecosensitiveness which is the purpose of this paper. *The Village By The Sea* is an interesting text for students, teachers, researchers and ecoreaders to understand and widen the orbits of eco-criticism and ecoconsciousness.

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