

A Portrait of Threatened Landscape in Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea*

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Abstract

*Ecocriticism in true sense began in the 1970s with a view to interpret literary texts from the environmental point of view. Needless to say, its emergence was caused by the rapid devastation of the natural world that the 20th century witnessed following the craze for progress through industrialization. Proponents of this school seek to bring in limelight the environmental forces that always remain dormant, mute and yet embedded within the literary and they examine those forces against the environmental background. This article undertakes a penetrating reading of Anita Desai's seminal novel *The Village by the Sea* from the ecocritical point of view. The narrative in this novel focuses on the outcry of the rustic people of Thul living in the proximity of the Arabian Sea for saving their landscape from the politically motivated industrialization. The writer tries to portray the devastation of the natural landscape in the face of industrialization and urbanization. Though, the novel is about Hari's displacement from the village to Bombay where he learns the valuable lessons of adapting to the changing scenario of his village, the undertone is that of concern over the devastation of the natural landscape. To communicate her concern, she improvises Hari, Adarkar and Mr. Sayyed as her spokesmen. This article explicates various facets of the imminent threat to the landscape of Thul.*

Anita Desai is a prolific writer in the post-colonial Indian Literature in English. Several of her novels share the ecocritical concerns and her novel *The Village by the Sea* stands out prominently among others in this regard. To write this novel, she spent several days in a village on the western coast of India and this is why the novel constantly echoes air of reality and factuality. Ever since its publication it has remained one of her widely read novels among her corpus.

The term ecocriticism came in currency in the late 1970s with a view to study the interconnections between literature and the ecology. Its fundamental proposition is that literature in any era represents the environment in a variety of ways. The business of an ecocritic is to investigate the extent and impact of environmental forces in the literary texts. Like feminism or Marxism it takes up both the old and new literary masterpieces and shows how the environmental forces give an enhanced appreciation. In short “ecocriticism designates the critical writings which explore the relations and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities.” (Abrams 96)

At the outset it is important to note that this article delineates the threat in the form of impending industrialization that had reached the very threshold of Thul. The watchmen and Hari’s friend Ramu report that the government has resolved to take over the agricultural land of Thul for the purpose of setting up industrial estate on the coastal strip and this triggers a wave of apprehension and never-ending debate in the rustic people of the village and later they organized and staged protest rallies in Thul, Alibag and Mumbai. With an unparalleled strength of craftsmanship Desai divides the people in this novel into groups: some in favour of industrialization some opposing it and some neutral. The novel is all about a spectrum of reactions finely put together.

The very first chapter gives the reader the beautiful description of the natural landscape of the village Thul with its rich and pristine beauty. The title of the novel breathes in the spirit of naturalness. The main occupation of the people in Thul is fishing and sea remains embedded in all that they do. Men go on fishing with their traditional boats while the women collect molluscs on the beaches where water is rather shallow. Early morning the beach is visited by gulls, curlews and sandpipers. Other birds mentioned are drongoes, robins, bul-bul, crows, pigeons, ducks, egrets, herons, kites etc. The villagers offer flowers to the rock on the beach which they consider sacred. The vegetation is dominated by the casurina and pandanus, coconuts, betel nuts, banana, *bhindi* etc.

The first murmur of the threat comes when Hari, the protagonist, sees a lorry being parked in front of a tin shack just round the foot of the hill. Later, from Ramu, his friend, Hari learnt that hundreds of factories would be built and the Government had resolved to set up industrial estate there. He also came to know that it was just a beginning and they would also bring bulldozers, earthmovers and steamrollers to speed up the work. The quarters for the workers would also be built. Thus the author gives the readers a sense of omnipotence of the machine civilization that can potentially destroy natural bodies like a mountain or a beach or even turn the course of a river or force people to abandon their traditional occupations. This is why Hari was reluctant to accept Ramu’s account for he held that no one can change the shape of the natural structures with such a rapid pace. Hari’s first reaction echoes his concern for the natural landscape.

“Hah.” Hari laughed, not believing a word. How could the hill and the temple disappear? It had been there all his life and his father’s and grandfather’s as well.

Ramu was surely telling a tale.”(Desai 13)

The second significant development in the ecocritical context concerns Biju’s acquiring a diesel boat that was equipped with deep freeze. Later the women who were collecting molluscs on the sea beach exchanged that Biju, the fisherman was going to build a bigger and faster boat. This is the first signal of the threat of industrialization and subsequent urbanization that loomed large on Thul. This was the first automatic boat ever bought by any Thul fisherman. We know from the gossip of the women as to how the sea coast had become unproductive and the fishermen hardly got any tangible catch and that forced them to venture deep into the sea day by day.

Later, the watchman guarding the installation material at the factory site reinforced the fragility of the beach as he sarcastically commented that he could not get any big fish to eat though he was on the coast for a few days. With his diesel Biju would travel miles into the sea which had never witnessed fishing so far and catch tons of fish. This points the fact that to meet the growing human avarice, the sea would be exploited beyond its tolerable level. It also gives the readers a sense that time has come when industrialization has come down to the landscape of Thul and the worrying reason is that it was a government sponsored project and no one could stop it. The watchman announced that the upcoming industrial estate would be stretching from Thul to Uran. The factories would produce chemical fertilizers. The villagers were accustomed to fish manure that they used in their fields but now the fertilizer would be manufactured on a large scale and this would be carried in lorries to different parts of India. This would ruin the traditional occupations of the people. Their lands would be taken over but they would not get any jobs as they required technical skills and hence meant for chemists and engineers. This is the horrific fallout of the industrialization happening at Thul.

“No, not manure, pumpkin-head. This is to stop people from following their cows and buffaloes around and collecting their dung to put in their miserable fields. Here the factories will produce tons of chemicals to be sent all over the country and sold to farmers. *Rich* farmers.” (Desai 43)

When the watchman described the qualities of chemical fertilizers in superlative terms Hari replied that they used manure prepared from fish and cow dung and it was very good for coconut. On another occasion the watchman told Biju that there was not enough fish left in the sea at Thul and hence they need to give up fishing and turn to something new. But Biju replied that they would till their farms and grow crops and since the soil was pretty fertile they were sure of good yield. This shows that despite the deteriorating fishing business the villagers would still turn to occupations that would not cause any harm to the landscape.

“And if there is not enough fish for us, there is plenty of food anyway – paddy and vegetables and coconuts. Where else in this country do we get such good crops? 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. Have you eaten our good rice?" (Desai 60)

Thul was been chosen for the purpose of building the industrial estate because it was close to the sea and the waste could be easily pumped into the sea. When agricultural land is forcibly snatched from the farmers, they are often rendered unemployed and since they lacked technical knowhow and college education they could surely not avail to factory jobs. This gave rise to social unrest, the strife between the government and the landless folk took a violent turn. This is why the watchman being the spokesperson of the haves ruled out the possibility of offering any jobs to the local people who would sell their lands for the industrial estate. In his first ever speech in Thul, Adarkar who represented their constituency in the state assembly mooted the idea that the villagers would not get jobs in the factories to be built at Thul.

"The men will tell you that you will get jobs. I tell you that they cannot give you all jobs. The factories will be run by trained engineers, by men with degrees from colleges in the city. There may be few jobs for simple people like us who have never gone to school but have spent our lives in producing food for other people. Jobs as sweepers, jobs as coolies – the worst jobs, the most ill-paid jobs." (Desai 62)

Desai argues that there is no political solution to the problem faced by the poor villagers of Thul. This is why their agitation was crushed and their voice silenced. Since the government had resolved to acquire the coastal strip the villagers would have to surrender because under the pretext of progress the villagers' outcry was bound to go unheard. Mr. Adarkar, the local MLA, delivered fiery speeches going round the affected villages and gathered the support of the villagers and staged a procession in Mumbai. But Hari who participated in the rally in Mumbai was disillusioned to see that the Government machinery was very powerful and an MLA like Adarkar with a few thousand farmers could never persuade the Chief Minister to give up the plan of land acquisition. "The injustice caused by the unscrupulous industrialists and politicians to the innocent people is another important dimension of Desai's thematic concerns in this novel." (Madhusankha: Web)

In his opinion at least 2500 acres of fertile coastal land would be snatched from the farmers and a large number of trees, paddy crops and fish would be destroyed. The general sense was that the decision being politically motivated there was no easy solution to it and this was why people knew from the beginning that Adarkar's Mumbai rally would end up in an absolute failure. It is only at the end of the novel that the readers learn from Mr. Sayyed Ali who arrived in Thul for studying the tiny bird called *baya* that they had lost the case in the court and the politicians having won it, the land would be acquired. As a consequence the bird like of *baya* was at stake for habitat would be lost in the process of industrialization. He revealed that in future he might not get an opportunity to see and study the bird because the paddy

crops would be ruined. The bird used paddy leaves for building beautiful nests, he maintained. This also brings home, from an expert on birds the consequence of deforestation for building factories. In absence of paddy, the bird can't make a nest and it would be forced to leave the place. Thus Sayyed Ali gives the reader the extent of damage caused by industry and its impact on human and bird life.

“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 licences in the name of progress. Thul is lost.” (Desai 154)

The cart driver who was carrying Hari to Rewas termed human beings growing dependence on factory manufactured products as ‘a new disease’. Anita Desai deems this concern of population explosion as the root cause of increasing industrialization. The cart driver being the writer's spokesman argued that the increasing population had worsened the situation as it led to scarcity of resources on the surface of the earth. There had emerged an unprecedented need of mass production of commodities to cope with the ever increasing population. He reminded Hari that in the olden days people spun yarn in their cottages, grinded grains at home and made compost from the cattle dungs but in the face of rapidly increasing population this had completely changed. Thus, Anita Desai proposes that the ecocritical concerns are no more to be studied by the intelligentsia alone but it is high time for all to come forward and have a say. Thus her aim is to educate the masses of the evils of industrialization in its divergent forms.

“Not enough, not enough,” agreed the cart driver. “Nothing is enough. We are too many on the earth now. Not enough fuel for all, not enough food, no enough jobs – or schools, or hospitals or trains, buses or horses. Too many people, not enough to go round. It was not so.” (Desai 71)

Hari's stay in Bombay changed his view of city life. The moment he reached the Sassoon Docks, he was shocked to hear the deafening noise of the people jostling and moving hurriedly. The streets were full of people, rickshaws, carts, *tongas*, buses, cars, taxis and lorries. He was deeply grieved to note that the city was not willing to absorb the villagers and showed resistance. People were controlled by the policemen like cattle. The bus driver's humiliating comment, ‘send him back there – let him grow pumpkins – keep him off the Bombay streets’ represents this resistance. (Desai 75)

Sayyed Ali's speech at the *Kala Ghoda* serves as an exception to this resistant attitude of the city people. He made it clear that when it comes to pollution we cannot distinguish a city from a village. This is why though he was a Bombay resident he determined to fight for the villagers. He gave the people scientific information about the evils of industrialization. He cited the example of Japan where following industrialization mercury was pumped into the sea which first poisoned the fish and later the people who ate it were also poisoned. Sayyed

Ali's speech was pretty eye opening to Hari. He told that there was no space in Bombay to accommodate the unemployed people from the villages.

“These factories that are to come up in Thul – Vaishet will pump deadly chemicals in to the air – fertilizers cannot be manufactured without polluting the air for miles around. Sulphur dioxide, ammonia and dust will be scattered far and wide.” (Desai 77)

According to one of the speakers who happened to work in the meteorological observatory of Alibagh, the upcoming industrialization would release iron particles in the surrounding air and thus badly hamper the functioning of the observatory. In his opinion, the observatory established in 1904 had been instrumental in providing significant information to the Oil and Natural Gas Commission and the Survey of India and that also means in future the observatory would not be able to supply inputs to would be ruined. This underlines the fact that pollution often hampers the important meteorological activities that give early warning of natural disasters.

Conclusions

Though at times the ambivalence lurks at the end of the day Desai sticks to her mission of reform and makes a strong plea in favour of the landscape. Ambivalence persist the earlier narrative of the novel, but soon it gets a surer territory. A lot of unification takes place towards the close of the novel and the tone appears that of reconciliation. This is why Sayyed Ali who always fought for the cause of the environment exhorts Hari to live in the midst of his people and be an entrepreneur by means of poultry or watch mending which is an ecofriendly occupation. The message conveyed here is that since the population is growing unabated, there is no respite from the menace of industrialization. In that situation what we can do is to adapt to less hazardous means of progress.

The novel vividly describes the intrusion of a city into a peaceful natural landscape. The writer argues that such decisions are often politically motivated and are taken to safeguard the vested political-industrial interests. They devastate the natural landscape and the damage cannot be measured in any yardstick. The city has the autonomy, under the mask name of progress, to infiltrate into the countryside and steal its vital resources but the affected people are not absorbed by giving them employment. Thus the impact of industrialization is colossal and its socio-economic and psychological consequences are far-reaching and long lasting. The real cost of the devastation is thus cannot be calculated. Thus Anita Desai succeeds in portraying the volatile picture of threatened landscape in this novel.

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