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# LangLit

ISSN 2349-5189



*An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal*

## THE CHILDHOOD POETICS OF POVERTY: A STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S NOVEL, *THE VILLAGE BY THE SEA*

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### ABSTRACT:

*As Indian writer in English, Anita Desai has been a writer of human psyche, dealing with the socio-psychological issues of her characters amidst the cultural and social hardships of the modern Indian society. She is hailed worldwide for portrayals of the suffering souls of Indian women and children amidst the patriarchal social construct. Her novel, The Village by the Sea is a classic example of Children's Fiction that could inspire adolescents and adults towards the ideals of life. It portrays from the reality basis, a poverty-ridden family of a fisherman of a village located at the western coast of India. Formed of the traditional patriarchal Hindu cultural traits, the adolescents, Lila and Hari, maintain the equilibrium of the family with honesty, courage, hardwork and persistence amidst the domestic hardships. Their adolescence can be analytically viewed through the lenses of the theories of psychology and sociology as given by Abraham Maslow, Elizabeth Hurlock, Jerry j. Bigner and Sudhir Kakkar. Along multiple parameters, the novel proves to be a prose-epic.*

**Key words:** Indian Culture, Coastal Village, Family, Mother, Father, Adolescence, Poverty, Self-Respect, Hope, Self-Actualization, Honesty, Hardwork

### Introduction:

The world views Anita Desai as a great Indian writer in English who created the modern classics in literature during the second half of the twentieth century and even after it. The greatness lies not only in the thematic concern for Indian life, but also in the way to narrate it. It is the vision of life and the subsequent formulation of language in a specific mould of a psychological writing that endows poetic character to her short-stories and novels. Her concern for the agony and suffering of Indian women, children and immigrants remained a major part of her vision towards welfare of mankind. The corpus of her writings is large. It begins with *Cry the Peacock* (1963) and continues with 'The Lady and the Unicorn' (2015).

'The Village by the Sea' (1982) is one of her novels which is generally known as Children's Fiction. However, the adolescents projected in the novel are culturally elevated and courageous to face the adversity of human situation and look forward with hope for betterment and happiness. Probably, this is the reason as to why the novel won the annual Guardian Children's Fiction Prize by a Panel of British Children's Writers. The novel has a strong documentary touch wherein much from the real life has been reflected. It is stated by

Vol. 8 Issue 2

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November, 2021

Website: [www.langlit.org](http://www.langlit.org)

Contact No.: +91-9890290602

Indexed: ICI, Google Scholar, Research Gate, Academia.edu, IBI, IIFC, DRJI



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the novelist in a Note before the Text of the novel: 'This story is based entirely on facts. Thul is a real village on the western coast of India and all the characters in this book are based on people who live in this village. Only their names have been altered' (1)

After publication of the novel in 1982, it is received not only as children's fiction but also acclaimed as a great story of Indian rural life. *New York Book Review* viewed it as follows: 'Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* is an exciting and moving story about life in an Indian coastal village and life in the unimaginably big city of Bombay'. *India Today* praised the novel 'as stylistic triumph that matches the victory of a boy and a girl whose grit pulled them through'. Andrea Reece appreciated the novel as 'a very powerful story that fully deserves its place as a modern classic'. With such Reviews and comments worldwide, the novel created a space for its systematic and comprehensive study in terms of the structure of the human world portrayed in it. Therefore, its analytical study along the cultural, sociological and psychological parameters can be much meaningful and significant for defining the qualities of the life of the adolescent children Lila and Hari, and therefrom the marks of the rural Indian ethos.

The sense of identity as viewed by Sudhir Kakkar (1978) with his reference to Eric Erikson needs to be mentioned when we look into the socio-psychological features of an individual. Kakkar comments: 'The concept of identity as defined by Eric Erikson being neither purely psychological nor purely social but a psychosocial construct' (2) (*Revisiting the Inner World*, p xi). Therefore, it would be appropriate to perceive that the mind-set of an individual is a complex phenomenon derived from the hereditary traits, the cultural conditions, the familial situations and the individual needs and aspirations.

**This paper, therefore, attempts** to explore and analyse through the Theory of Adolescence, the familial, social and psychological conditions across the life of the characters, Lila and Hari, in relation to the cultural ethos in which they move and the cultural value-system unconsciously adopted by them in the course of time. It is based on the hypothesis that the life of the adolescents in the novel is governed by the socio-psychological conditions and its analytical consideration can give rise to better understanding of the life rooted in the large range of the socio-cultural context.

#### Discussion:

As viewed by Jerry J. Bigner (1994) each stage of the life span has its own developmental theme which Erikson terms as 'a psychosocial crisis or a challenge to attain a healthy rather than unhealthy attitude' (3) Bigner defines Adolescence as the stage of the lifespan that represents a transition period between childhood and adulthood. It characteristically begins at age thirteen and extends through the age eighteen. This phase of life shows initiation of the sense of individuation which involves taking responsibility for one's actions and behaviour. It requires that a person recognize and respect his or her distinction and it also means owning and living with the consequences of these decisions. During adolescence, there is a desire for isolation which teenagers demonstrate at times by withdrawing from interactions with peers and family members and devoting personal time to daydreaming or being alone. There is higher degree of emotionality which is expressed by the multiple emotions. Bigner further observes that the experiences that help a child develop a sense of industry in middle childhood lay the foundation for attitudes about work in later life. An adolescent uses work related experiences as part of the identity and individuation process.



Abraham Maslow (1987) in his book, *Motivation and Personality* gives a substantial account of the hierarchy of human needs and postulates the significance of motivation in human life. Maslow remarks : ' If the physiological needs are relatively well gratified, there then emerges a new set of needs which we may categorize as the safety need- security, stability, dependency, protection, freedom from fear, anxiety, and chaos, need for structure, order, law and limits; strength in the protector; and so on'(4). Karen Horney (1965) in her book, *Neurosis and Human Growth* emphasizes the importance of early socio-psychological experiences in the shaping of the normal personality and explains how it can lead to neurosis.

Now, it can be an interesting and stimulating exercise to look into the text with these theoretical ideas in mind. The text has to open with the concern and the insight for the culture and the family. In order to have the overall view of the family, the first phase of the family life, invisible in the narration of the novel, is to be logically visualized in the past as it emerges from the present situation. In fact, the idealistic and the ideological behaviour of the children, Lila and Hari, prompts us to look into their past.

It seems that the father was an active fisherman who had owned a boat and the mother was a well cultured Indian housewife. Amidst such culturally able parents having a keen sense of the Hindu ideology of Indian life, the children might have grown. Their socialization in terms of cultural acquisition of the pattern and features of life has been properly done by the parents. In this regard, the observations of Keith Otterbein needs to be mentioned: 'Culture is learned. It is transmitted from generation to generation.'(5) As implied by the statement of Otterbein, the cultural traits are duly imbibed in the minds of the children through socialization and family experiences. It seems from the present that the mind-sets of the children, Lila, Hari, Bela and Kamal have been well-prepared and settled by the parents along these lines.

It is undoubtedly true that it was a happy family during the past times whose microenvironment might have harmony and joy of co-life. The children seem to have grown with love from the mother and the father that develops in them strong kinship bonds and a sense of the identity of the family. Lila and Hari seem to have been cultivated with sound emotional balance and due concern for the welfare of the family through love, kinship and a sense of responsibility. It provides them with motivation and energy to cope up with the poverty-ridden circumstances of the family during the present times as portrayed in the novel. It is certain that the children are well brought up as a result of the parental functions.

The fortune of the family might have turned down from the time the mother began to suffer from weakness and fever. It grows in the course of time and when the novel opens, it takes a significant turn that renders the mother bed-ridden. Her worsening ill-health appears in the following lines of the novel" 'She herself looked like a crumpled grey rag lying there. She had been ill for a long time. No one knew what was wrong. She had no pains and no fever but simply grew weaker and weaker all the time' (p.7) This critical and serious physical condition of the mother forms imbalance in the harmony of the family members.

The strong realization of it rises from the father who is not only the chief of the family but a patriarch. It exerts pressure of anxiety and depression towards him and thereby affects his enthusiasm of living life. In fact, the nature of the depression of the father can be better understood in the light of his psychological adversity caused mainly by the failure of the conjugal relationship between the husband and the wife as it is seen in the relationship of

Maya and Gautama in Anita Desai's another novel, *Cry the Peacock*. It leads to the father's alienation from the family losing harmony and integrity with the ultimate structure of the family. It remains the vital cause of his addiction to wine and his psycho-physical movement amidst his drunkard friends where he finds some solace and comfort. One can view in the father's mind, the psychological burden of marrying the three daughters in future.

The deteriorated quality of friends does not yield any good to him but creates further circumstances in the family. It aggravates his addiction and makes him psychologically decisive in their favour. He loses the emotional ties with the family and thereby neglects the family welfare. In search of happiness which he does not find in the family environment, he lingers amidst his friends. His idleness and the subsequent feelings of depression caused by the psycho-physical complex formed of breakdown to his conjugal relationship with his wife, his toddy addiction and the company of bad friends, renders him lose his everyday work of fishing. For maintaining the family expenses, he had to borrow money from the people and in order to repay the amounts, he had to sail the boat and hence, he loses the important source of income to the family.

It is observed that the family is divided into three components: the father, the mother and the children. The relationship amongst the children is full of affection. The mother and the father are at distant places from them as created by the circumstances. They feel and think about their ailing mother and they have a great deal of affection for her. On the contrary, the relationship between the children and the father is at stakes. The children have, within their psyche, nervousness and protest for the father's idleness, toddy addiction and his sense of dominance and violence. It must be understood that it evolves more from his realization of failure in life and the ultimate frustration and less from being a patriarch of the family.

Thus the family forms a triangular structure: the three components at the three different points of existence. Jerry J. Bigner (1994) defines a balanced functioning of family as follows: 'The ultimate goal of family system functioning is to maintain stability or homeostasis over time. This is also known as dynamic equilibrium' (6) In the situation prevailing in the family under consideration, it is observed that the homeostasis of the family is lost to a significant extent. The dilapidated condition of their hut (p.5) can be attributed not only to penury but also to the negligence of the father rising from his depression which fully overlaps his sense of family welfare.

The depression caused by the circumstances functions actively in the minds of the father and the son, Hari. In fact, it operates differently across their minds. If the father becomes idle and drunkard, the son becomes restless and does hard physical labour in their small piece of land for earning in order to continue the family welfare. He works hard for coming out from poverty. The socio-cultural environment that prevails in the novel in the Indian context, can be rightly perceived in the judgement of Sudhir Kakkar (1978). He puts: 'This milieu includes the religious ideals and historical traditions as well as the social institutions, which are specific, if not exclusive, to Indian society' (7)

When the novel opens, we find Lila wading through the sea water and worshipping the three sacred rocks: 'It was the sacred rock, a kind of temple in the sea' (p.1) Lila inherits this cultural belief from her mother and from her own observations of the environment. It gradually becomes a part of her 'collective unconscious' (8) as described by Carl Jung in his essay, 'Psychology and Literature' (1930). Hence, she represents a stereotype of traditional

Hindu young girl devoted to the traditional beliefs and ideas amidst the patriarchal cultural practices. Irrespective of her formal education. It generates in her person the voluntary sense and capacities for the familial responsibilities such as domestic work and care for the mother and her younger sisters.

The women thronging around the 'sacred rock' with 'flowers and red kumkum powder' (p.2) worshipping it at the morning times, is representative of the ritualistic unconscious sense of the Indian womanhood. Lila's mind-set is formed along such attributes of the culture. In fact, it has a sense of glorification merged in the ritualistic hold of the Hindu religion, myths, legends and the local social history and subsequently it gives rise to one's acceptance, appreciation and applause in harmony with the mass of the traditional Hindu society. Now, it becomes Lila's way of life along which she moves. It decides Lila's sense of happiness: 'She felt it was the best time of day for her, the only perfectly happy and peaceful one.' (p.3) However, it could be deciphered that her sense of happiness is shifted from the family environment to the peaceful morning rituals at the sacred rocks at the sea, as it is caused by the drab conditions of the family due to poverty and a subsequent burden of responsibilities.

If Lila's socialization takes place amidst the family and the women around her, Hari receives his lessons of socialization by interacting with his friends, his social observations of the people and his thoughts about them along with awareness of his own responsibilities. He works hard in a small piece of land that the family owns. The psycho-physical movement of his life is characterized by a burden of the responsibilities such as marrying the three sisters, the failing health of the mother, the addicting father and the economic crisis created in the family along with borrowed money from the people. Therefore, it could be argued that the most significant psychological phenomenon that occurs during the late adolescence of this boy is a strong realization of the significance of money and wealth in human life. It dawns at his mind that earning money is of supreme value that makes life comfortable and honoured. In this context, it would be appropriate to refer to Elizabeth Hurlock's studies regarding social and personal significance of money.

Elizabeth Hurlock (1974) projects her perception of the individual and the family prestige and power rising from money and wealth. Her distinction between 'Old money' and 'New money' is interesting. She comments: 'When a person lives on an inherited income, whetier it supplements what he earns or frees him from working, he is judged as coming from successful family. Old money is thus a symbol of family success. By contrast, new money or money earned by the person himself is regarded as a symbol of personal success. In every culture, greater prestige is associated with old money than with new money and the person with the old money is more favourably judged' (9)

Along with Elizabeth Hurlock's social judgement, it is perceived that the thought of poverty and the circumstantial realization of resolving it for holding the responsibilities, develops in Hari's mind to a significant extent (p.67) It completely overlaps his thoughts with turbulence and agitation of new thoughts of earning better. It appears in the following lines: 'When he thought of all his troubles-his drunken father, Mr. de Silva's insult, the lack of work and money- Hari wished he too could soar up into the sky and disappear instead of being tied to the earth here' (p.59) In fact, he had a fascination for the wealth and glory of Bombay city. It was his dream to be there for more earning (p. 45)

Hari's wish to move away from Thul is further aggravated in terms of his rage over the death of their beloved dog, Pinto, due to poisoning as done by one of the Khanekar men due to not repaying the borrowed money (p.101) It proves to be a peak point of his suffering due to debts. The violent psychophysical condition attributed to extreme sadness, agony and anxiety, becomes a turning point. It gives rise to his immediate thought and act to move to Bombay. In fact, as Erikson views, it brings about Hari's 'psychological crisis' (9) during the adolescence stage of his life. It is with this fired mind-set that he leaves the village during night and joins the protesting Procession moving to Bombay.

His life in Bombay emerges as a new sunrise across the horizon of his mind. In a way, it is characterized by his psychological movement from darkness to light. It is Bombay that renews and reforms him from a village-boy to a city-youth. After physical journey from Thul to Bombay, there starts his psycho-social journey in Bombay and hence, the mature lesson of life. His penniless wandering in the vast city first acquaints him with thirst and hunger as basic human needs. The awe, anxiety, fear and awkwardness of the new world rules over his mind resulting into botheration and uncertainty. The coconut man (p.131), the beggar (p.134), the stall-owner (p.136) and the watchman of the Seabird building, Hira Lal (p. 143) give him the mixed experience of humiliation and help. It is Hira Lal who proves to be kind enough to feel over Hari's hunger and tiredness and therefore, takes him to his friend Jagu for 'a cheap meal' (p.143). Hari's movement in the city from the beginning to this moment of meeting Jagu can be perceived as the first phase of his habitation in Bombay characterized mainly by alienation and awareness and during which he remains psychologically unstable.

The second phase of his life in Bombay starts with his work in The Sri Krishna Eating House owned and run by Jagu. It remains the most difficult work to be in 'the firelit kitchen' (p. 165) doing the work of kneading the dough for chhapatis with other boys all through the day and even during night. The hardest situation was that he had to sometimes sleep on the dusty floor. During the rainy season, the habitation gets worst causing gross inconvenience and trouble. He had a great deal of physical and psychological tiredness every day but he remains happy with his earning of a rupee a day.

Hari's Letter to his ailing mother (p.151) shines bright across the entire narrative. In the attempt of exploring the socio-psychological resources and reasons of Hari's existence, the letter needs to be quoted: "Dear Mother, I am in Bombay. I have a job. I will bring you my earnings. I hope you are well. I am well. Remember me to my sisters." The words and the voice evolves from his soul and psyche that was fed by the mother and hence, it had given his mind and body, the energy for struggle against adversity. The letter remains an iconic example of the mother-son relationship amidst the adversity of rural Indian family life, portrayed in the Indian English literature.

Hari's stay in Bombay becomes comparatively comfortable and harmonized with the compassion and support of the old watchmaker, Mr. Panwallah, who owns his shop near the eating house, known as, 'Ding Dong Watchworks' (p.148) He becomes his mentor with strong concern for his physical, psychological and economic welfare. His parent-like role in moulding Hari remains vitally significant in his development. It is Mr. Panwallah who trains Hari as apprentice in repairing watches. In the course of time, Hari develops skills and talent in it and repairs watches independently under his guidance. It could be argued that in Bombay, Hari survives, grows and develops less on food and more on harmony of help and kindness from the people like Jagu and Mr. Panwallah who shine in the novel as the towers of

humanity amidst the tall buildings of the city. However, the core of his character remains unchanged. In this context, one can refer to Eric Fromm's concept of 'static adaptation' (1960): 'By static adaptation, we mean such an adaptation to patterns as leaves the whole character unchanged and implies only the adoption of a new habit' (11). It means that Hari's character absorbs the useful newness and expands itself towards change and development.

The third phase of his life in Bombay becomes psychologically very crucial when he listens to the Radio news about storm in the monsoon and knows, 'Ten fishing boats are reported lost at sea. Many fishermen are dead' (p.196). When the reference of Alibagh appears in the news, he almost gives a cry, 'That's my home! That's my land!' (p.196). In Hari's mind, the sense, sentiments and emotions of 'belonging' manifest strongly. Abraham Maslow (1987) while describing the hierarchy of basic human needs, focuses on the need for belongingness and love: 'If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs' (10). From this discussion, it is to be understood that Hari becomes homesick specifically due to the shaft of shock about damage and destruction of his place caused by the monsoon storm.

As a native of the Thul village, born and brought up over the years, Hari's mind remains fused with the Human Ecology therein. The affection and association that he has with the human and non-human aspects of his village, his parents, sisters, their hut, their dog, Pinto, the piece of land, his friends, the sea and the Nature around- this native environment occupies the important part of his unconscious. It certainly activates with the Radio news. Hari's psychological situation thus formed, reminds us of Rabindranath Tagore's short story, 'The Homecoming' wherein the adolescent Phatik Chakraborty suffers psycho-physically at his maternal uncle's home in Calcutta as he loses his freedom and joy in the village environment at his native place centred by the mother.

'Pinto's silence and Hari's strange disappearance' (p.127) sets the family at the Thul village to more serious conditions. It largely imbalances the kinship harmony of the family and makes the living insecure. The situation is intervened with the arrival of de Silva and the family from Bombay. It proves god's intervention in resolving the suffering of human beings. Mr. de Silva, the Businessman in Bombay having the white bungalow, 'Mon Repos' at Thul, saves the family from getting ruined. The children- Hari, Lila, Kamal and Bela- work at his bungalow. It is de Silva who gives life to the dying mother by admitting her to the hospital in Alibagh. Diwali really remains the festival of joy for their long-strained pains and agonized hearts, the mother being Lakshmi of the home at the centre, the cementing power that binds all the elements together with love and affection.

All the members of the family are reformed towards the end of the novel: the mother is redeemed of her disease of extreme anaemia and gains health. The father gives up toddy addiction and crying weakly, expresses his emotions for the suffering during the past and the happiness at present. Hari is renewed with ideas, vision and capacities for multiple occupations. He brings money of his earning from Bombay. Bela and Kamal are overjoyed to look at the harmony and happiness of the family. He decides to start poultry farm in their small piece of land and even start watch- mending shop on the backdrop of new people and new colonies due to the big fertilizer factory. Hari emerges with high self-esteem and potential for self-actualization as transformed by Mr. Panwallah in Bombay

The most central aspect of the family as it emerges from the novel is the indomitable strength of the kinship bonds that provide a great deal of affection and sacrifice for each other. The family as a social unit survives and renews because of it. T. B. Bottomore (1962) illustrates its vital importance: 'In earlier societies, and in the non-industrial societies of the present day, kinship is of greater significance. I have shown its importance in India' (11). The family moves from darkness to light all through the socio-psychological turbulence balanced by the kinship spirit.

Though the evils of poverty devour the happy and sunny childhood of the children, it fails to deprive them of their innocence. It is the extended sense of innocence in terms of humility that gives them social acceptance. Their sense of acknowledgement for help and kindness is often expressed by the novelist in the word, 'grateful'. They never remained violent and imprudent. With their politeness and engrossment in work, they earn not only money but also affection from people. Though their childhood is clouded with the sombre shades of anguish, anxiety and hardwork, they put up with it with a great deal of patience.

At the depth of their minds, they crave for self-esteem, affection and acceptance. They are deprived of it by some of the people's perception of their poverty. The sense of humiliation and neglect by the the society is stored in their feelings. It provides them with energy to overcome their poverty. However, the children remain free from any kind of vice as a matter of their personal and social behaviour. The novel does not project even the slightest sense of 'sexual awakening' as viewed by the psychologists during this phase of life. The poetics of the novel lies in performing courage to struggle against poverty. This struggle is social, physical and psychological.

The distance between the theory of Adolescence and the mindset and the behaviour of Lila and Hari make us arrive at the judgement that every time, there is no correspondence and proportion between the theory and the practice of life. The life of adolescents emerging from this context transcends the normal range of theoretical considerations and moves in the direction of the higher qualities of life signified by the prefix, 'super'. In this regard, it is found that the conditions and the cultural moulding elevate the children on the scale of age and values.

#### Conclusion:

In relation to the life of the adolescents in the novel, deeply rooted in the rural Indian cultural ethos and the overall human ecology, we can arrive at the conclusion that the novel manifests some of the qualities of epic-novel. It may not express the cosmic vision of human welfare as Leo Tolstoy does in his novel, *War and Peace* (1869), but it is certain that the novel has high potential for the substance of life and its artistic presentation making it realistic rising from the core of the suffering human psyche. It makes most vivid the psychological and social movement of the life of the adolescents. The vividness therein, grips the mind and the soul. It projects an inspiring message for mankind to walk along the light of the God. It is to say that one must cherish and execute the sense of honesty, courage, integrity and hardwork while facing the challenges of adversity and develop the morals of our capacities for not getting corrupt under any circumstances. The message of patience and hope as virtues rising from this novel illuminates the human mind. In this regard, one can be tempted to find the parallel between *The Village by the Sea* and Ernest Hemingway's novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* that made him win Nobel Prize for Literature in the year, 1954.



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Remark

If *The Village by the Sea* speaks of the childhood poetics of poverty, *The Old Man and the Sea* vivifies the oldage poetics of poverty, much serious and sombre inclining in the realm of Tragedy. Life in both the novels-rising from the documentary with the epic dimensions of the integrity of man as the highest human value amidst adversity. Therefore, the protagonists from these novels -Hari and Santiago- become the true heroes of the modern literature.

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