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LOCATING ANITA DESAI'S *THE VILLAGE BY THE SEA* IN THE GENRE OF BILDUNGSROMAN

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ABSTRACT

Bildungsroman is a type of novel that portrays development of a young protagonist. In a typical English bildungsroman, a young man fed up with the suppression in his village, goes into a city where he encounters a series of difficulties, educates himself and returns home a changed man and works for the benefit of his society. Anita Desai's popular novel *The Village by the Sea* convincingly complies with the characteristics of this genre. This novel delineates Hari's quitting his village for lack of development options and his self-development in Bombay where after passing through a series of verisimilarities the boy learns adaptation, self-reliance, self-esteem, professional skills and ultimately gains maturity. True to the spirit of a typical bildungsroman, the protagonist returns to his native place a completely changed man and lives in harmony with the society that once isolated him. Born in a rural, poor family of the coastal village, Hari suffers a triple shock in terms of a drunkard father, bed-ridden mother and abject poverty and uncertainty about future prospect. Amidst this desperate situation, he leaves the village in a feat of anger and goes to Bombay and thanks to the benevolence of people like Hira Lal, Jagu, Mr. Panwallah and others he understands the need for adaptation. With robust optimism, he returns home on the auspicious day of Diwali, the festival of lights and finds all his difficulties resolved. Scrutinizing the novel from the bildungsroman point of view offers a rich ground for various interpretations.

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INTRODUCTION

The word 'Bildung' in German means shaping or formation while 'roman' stands for novel. Simply speaking bildungsroman means novel tracing the formation or creation of its protagonist. Bildungsroman is a German term for a novel which depicts the self-development of its central character. It is often described as "a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character" (Merriam Webster Online). This term came in currency in the context of Goethe's novel *Wilhelm*

MeistersLehrjahre however, in later years many prominent novelists tried their hand at this genre and produced a series of novels. Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* are some of the examples of this tradition. In simple words it is a "class of novel that deals with the maturation process, with how and why the central character develops as he does, both morally and psychologically. According to the Encyclopedia

Britannica it means “a novel of education” or “a novel of formation” (“Bildungsroman”).

This type of novel generally begins with some sort of discontent which causes the protagonist to go out into the world to seek his fortune. During his sojourn in a big city he encounters many difficulties - internal and external - gradually overcomes them and gains wisdom. The main motivation on the part of the central character is to gain maturity which he attains by overcoming a series of adverse situations. The conflict projected in such a novel is one between the protagonist and the society which runs counter to his aspirations. At last the protagonist prevails upon these challenges he gains wisdom and returns home a changed man and vows to benefit the society.

Early Glimpses: Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* depicts the predicament of Hari, a poor boy living in a coastal hamlet named Thul located at some 14 kilometers from Bombay. He has a drunkard father, a bed ridden mother suffering from TB and three sisters Lila, Kamal and Bela and on the top of all is without a boat to fish which is the common occupation of most people in that village. Since his father had sold the boat to repay the debt that incurred due to his drinking habit, Hari had to fish with net and often returned home without any substantial catch. Hari was extremely depressed due to this plight of his family and he always felt isolated from the social life at Thul. The family commanded no respect in the village due to his father's alcoholic addiction. He had a small patch of land where he grew vegetables but the yield was barely sufficient to make both ends meet. They often ate dry *chapatis* and pulled the days on. As his father had failed to carry out his parental responsibility to the family, Hari had to leave his schooling and work hard for the maintenance of his family. Though the school fee was pretty low he could not pay nor buy books. Due to this socio-economic deprivation he felt suffocated in Thul and decided to go to Bombay to explore numerous opportunities there. His father never went fishing but drank at the toddy shop. This had crippled the boy both externally and internally. Out of this humiliation he kept himself aloof from the society. He often avoided showing up while fishing as he has no boat of his own.

“Hari had seen them go as he brought his fishing net down the beach. He did not like to be watched, the only boy in the village with no boat and no job on the fishing boats. Also he knew he could not hope to catch much in his net along the shore.”
(Desai 21)

In these circumstances Hari drew inspiration from the sea that lay in front of his hut. He knew that in order to succeed he must run a risk. He knew the example of Biju, the rich fisherman of Thul, who reportedly ran the risk of smuggling gold and silver brought by the ships coming from distant lands of Africa and Arabia. Consequently, at a very young age he prepared himself to set out on an expedition of success; he wanted to reach Bombay at any cost.

“He knew how many men lost their lives at sea, how many were drowned each monsoon, how many boats were wrecked and never came back at all. At the same time the thought of sailing far, far out to sea and never coming back or else only with riches untold, attracted him strongly.”
(Desai 34)

In most of the English bildungsroman the protagonist exhibits his dislike for the small town he lives in and seeks to go in a big city usually a metropolis like London. Hari in this novel demonstrated great desire to go in Bombay for his development. The family had to skip breakfast in the morning and just manage with tea. Once they had a cow but it was sold to pay the debt caused by his drinking habit. Ramu, Hari's friend announced that Government was going to build hundreds of factories in Thul and they would surely get jobs in them. This kindled a ray of hope in Hari's mind. Later he met the watchman who lived in the shack guarding the factory material and learnt that the factories would provide employment to only skilled people like engineers and chemists and felt crestfallen. Similarly, he was hopeful of getting job on Biju's diesel boat, but this too, did not materialize. The responsibility of the family fell on his shoulders. He had to find husbands for his sisters. He knew that the weddings were very costly because the bridegrooms often demanded scooter, bicycle, gold buttons, jewelry, a buffalo, piece of

land etc. A sense of being grown was deepening both in Hari and his sisters. So his natural interest in the village sports diminished day by day and kept on figuring out a way of leaving Thul. Even Lila marked it on one occasion.

“She felt relieved now to think Hari was growing up and would soon be able to find work and earn money. Of course he was still young, a younger than her, and she could not expect him to work and earn like a man. Change would not come suddenly or quickly to their home and family, but it would come. She had to believe it would come.” (Desai 16)

It was not that all the people around him were lying in abject poverty. There was Biju who always caught tons of fish in his boat and who was building a trawler with a deep freeze installed in it and he said the boat would earn him thousand rupees a day. It could travel into deep sea fishing in any season. He had plans of procuring a few more such boats in his fleet. Hari also drew inspiration from ‘the large woman’ who used to buy all big fish at higher rates at the auction on the beach and sell it in Alibagh. The Khanekars were also a well to do family though they were also addicted to toddy and ruined their family life. Hari’s father owed some debt to the three Khanekar brothers who produced and sold toddy to the villagers and often tortured Hari and his sisters demanding the repayment. From these successful rustics Hari learned a lesson of courage and initiative.

The de Silvas bought *Mon Repos* from the Vakils and often spent the holidays in Thul. Hari cleaned their car and earned some money. He sold coconuts to the Malbaris occasionally. After spending the vacation in Thul, the de Silvas were about to go back to Bombay but they offered Hari’s father a small job of maintaining the *Mon Repos*. When Mr. de Silva saw Hari’s drunkard father he insulted him and denied the job. This added to Hari’s misery. Hari felt extremely suffocated and helpless in Thul for it was obstructive to his soaring ambition.

“When he thought of all the troubles – his drunkard 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, trudging round the temple which was not even a pretty one.” (Desai 41)

The progress of the building of factory was very slow as only a few pipes were laid and the watchman lived in his shack. Hari had no time to wait patiently for years because he was badly in need of a job. From the watchman he learnt that he might not get work in the factories because they needed only engineers and skilled people and Hari had neither technical skills nor any college degree. The watchman insulted him saying the people in Thul are drunkard and are unfit to work in the factories being built. In this circumstance Hari determined to fly to Bombay.

“Hari knew now that he could not continue to sit in the silent shadowy hut with his sisters, nor trail along the beach with his empty net, nor go lurking around the shack at the foot of the hill with the temple in the hope of a job that might not come through for years. He had to act, since there was no one else in the family fit to act and action was required.” (Desai 58)

Biju procured special timber from Alibagh and employed skilled people to build the boat. It would be equipped with a diesel engine and a deep freeze. Biju announced that it would travel at least 50 miles a day and would bring home tons of fish. He even articulated plan of building more such boats. But his sisters frightened Hari that working on Biju’s boat was full of risky for they held that he was a big smuggler of gold and Hari would be sent in prison sooner or later. This created apprehension in Hari’s mind and he began to give a serious thought to flying to Bombay. The watchman was also responsible in diverting Hari from working on Biju’s boat. In his opinion the fishing business on the Thul coast had been ruined as there were hardly any fish left there.

“There is hardly any fish left here. Yesterday I wanted to buy a pomfret of that size,” he said scornfully, making the villagers fall silent and listen. “and if you ask for prawns, all you get are miserable little shrimps. Not enough for Bombay people – not enough for even you villagers.

It's time you gave up your boats and nets and turned to something new." (Desai 59)
Hari knew that the upcoming factories would pollute the sea beaches and the fishing business would be ruined shortly. The fishing which is the main occupation of the coastal people of Thul is at risk. They will be deprived of their land and nor is there any guarantee of jobs in the upcoming factories.

"All the filth of their factories – for when you produce fertilizers, a lot of effluents are created which have to be disposed of – these will be dumped in the sea and will kill the fish for miles around. How will we live without our land, without the sea?" (Desai 62)

The watchman told that the agricultural land of Thul being very close to Bombay would be forcibly acquired by the Government for building factories. But the factories would provide jobs only to engineers and mechanics coming from across India. The local people will get only filthy jobs. Hari was in the dilemmatic situation and was unable to make a choice about his course of life. At times the thought of actively participating in the protest against the Government and there were occasions when he thought he must find a job in the upcoming factories that the Government had decided to build in Thul. But at the end of the day the thought of going to Bombay prevailed upon the thought of finding job in the factories and amidst this state of affairs Adarkar the MLA organized a protest rally in Bombay and called upon the villagers to accompany him to Bombay.

"As he turned over these questions in his mind, he found it was the idea of going to Bombay that excited him most. That was partly because he was attracted to the thought of fighting for his land along with the other villagers and partly because of the thought of going to Bombay at last. Here was the chance to go that he had been waiting all along." (Desai 65)

Hari's education in Bombay

Hari disembarked from the boat at the Sassoon docks and was shocked to see the terrifying traffic in the Bombay streets. With Mahe, the villager, he marched to the *Black Horse* and they

were held up for some time as there was women's procession demanding price cuts of essential commodities was passing by. Hari was surprised to learn that it was a protest rally carried out by the women alone. This incident proved an eye opening on Hari's part and motivated him to be self-reliant.

"Here in Bombay it seemed women did not trust men to manage for them, and they were determined to organize their affairs themselves. It was a very strange new idea to Hari and he did not join in the laughter or that followed in their wake, but walked on soberly after they had passed, wondering what his mother or Lila would have thought of it." (Desai 76)

Hari's interaction with Billu who sold coconut near the *Kala Ghoda* was equally inspiring. When Hari narrated him how the farmers were protesting against the government decision of taking over their farms, Billu exhorted him to be independent and never live with the mercy of anyone. Hari was impressed by the words of the ordinary coconut seller in the metropolis and for a while he wished he could sit at his feet and learn from him lessons of life.

"Take my advice and keep clear of the government. Don't ask it for anything, don't depend on it for anything. They tell you the government is your father and your mother. I tell you my father and my mother threw me out when I was six years old to go and earn my own living. I don't need them – I fend myself—I am a man and depend on myself. That is the best way to be, boy – you – take what you want. Be man, be independent." (Desai 85)

Hari wanted to realize the potentials dormant in him in Bombay. He knew that there were many easy ways to earn fortune in Bombay. The beggar proposed to teach Hari some dangerous tricks. But Hari refused to accept them. He wanted to be on his own by fair means. He could distinguish between what is good and what is bad. He knew that there were numerous opportunities in Mumbai and his future was full of prospects.

Hari went to Seabird where the de Silvas lived, but the watchman told that they had left for

Thul. The watchman named Hira Lal pitied and took him to Jagu who ran a canteen named Sri Krishna Eating House where coolies, beggars and cart poolers afforded to eat cheap food. Hari got the work of washing the pots, knead the dough and roll the *chapatis* and Jagu paid him a rupee a day. Later, Hari met Mr. Panwallah, who ran a small shop named Ding Dong Watchworks next door. He was very friendly and kind gentleman. He gave Hari money to buy a postcard. It was Mr. Panwallah who advised Hari to sleep in the park to get rid of the summer heat.

“The man looked so much like Sayyed Ali, the man who had spoken so well at the meeting at the Black Horse, that Hari instantly felt that here was another fine and impressive man whom he could trust and who would understand him and try to help him.” (Desai 94)

Mr. Panwallah identified the potentials in Hari and he knew the best could be taken out of that boy. He offered to teach him the skills of watch mending also pay him a small salary being his apprentice. With Jagu’s consent Hari would sit beside the old watchmaker through the afternoons and take lessons in watch mending. He was the first person to realize that Hari had got clever fingers. This step by the watch maker proved very confidence boosting on Hari’s part. His was pretty instrumental in evoking in Hari a sense of self-esteem, dignity of labour and a sense of adaptation to the changing circumstance. He played an important role in transforming Hari’s attitude to his village. He resolved all of Hari’s vexed queries pertaining to the dramatic developments taking place in his village. He advised Hari to learn to adapt to the change and not to fear anymore and also impressed upon him that if the government took over his land he must prepare to work in the factories. The crux of his advice was that there are certain inevitable happenings which we cannot stop and in that case it is always good to accept and adapt to them.

“But there will be other work, besides the factory. You can get work as a builder, or a roadmaker, when they are at building stage. Later, the engineers and mechanics will come to live there in the new housing

colonies and they will need people to work for them. They will need food, too – vegetables and milk and fruit and eggs.” (Desai 128)

After meeting with Mr. Panwallah massive attitudinal change precipitated in Hari. It garnered a sense of self-respect in him. He had begun to understand his own worth and acquire his identity. This is why when Hira Lal told him that the de Silvas were back from Thul, Hari made up his mind not to go to them and beg for work. This is because he did not want to be a car cleaner at the de Silvas. By now he had understood the fact that there were many ways to make a living in Bombay.

“He felt he could bear the shame and humiliation of finding his way into it and asking for work. He was no longer the frightened, confused boy who crawled into any whole where he could find shelter and protection. He knew he could make choices and decisions now.

Once Mr. Panwallah had assigned Hari the task of repairing the Rolex of one of his customers and thereby wanted to measure Hari’s success of an apprentice. To his surprise Hari repaired the watch. He asked the customer to pay Hari Rs. 10 as he had repaired it. It was Hari’s first hard earned money in a true sense. It was for the first time that he had put into practice his skills of watch-mending. This gave him a sense of exhilaration. “Hari stood staring at the note; he suddenly felt he was not a child any longer, that he was a man.” (Desai 131)

Disenchantment of city life

Hari came out of the Sassoon docks and found himself in the hustle and bustle in the Bombay streets and he was wonderstruck to see the terrifying traffic there. He saw people moving fast and felt as if people across the world had gathered in that city. At the *Kala Ghoda* where the villagers had gathered for the protest procession, he was shocked to see that the policemen were controlling the people like cattle. One of them called him as ‘fool’ and ‘pumpkin-head’. In that busy commercial world village people were not readily absorbed. The bus driver blurted out thus: “Send him back there – let him grow pumpkins – keep him off the Bombay streets.” As Hari wanted to know the address of the

de Silvas he asked the stall owner to read the chit and direct him, the later humiliated him sarcastically calling him 'a prince in disguise.'

Jagu's Sri Krishna eating House is a representative of the small stalls run on the city streets. The condition of the children working in these was equally wretched and pitiable. Hari could not sleep in the dining room at night as it was very hot and suffocating. In rainy season the coal became wet and caused smoke. Hari was shocked to see Jagu's hut in the slum as rain water leaked continuously from the tin roof and this forced his family sleep on the bed. His hut was located on a big drainage line and hence very unhygienic. Jagu had a quarrel with his wife over bringing the boy home and angrily left for the toddy shop and this incident also worked as a catalyst in distracting Hari from Bombay. The psychological fallout of this event is more important as it was his father's addiction that had wrought havoc in Hari's peaceful life.

Hari cultivated strong dislike for the urban life as he came across many people who indulged in unlawful activities. For example, he met Billu, the coconut seller who preached Hari philosophy of life, but later the beggar revealed that he was a criminal. The 'Mighty Policeman' who patrolled the park threatened Hari of putting into prison and thanks to the timely intervention by the gentle old man that Hari was rescued. The old man reprimanded the police and asked him to tighten screw on the antisocial elements rampant in that locality.

"Why bully a poor harmless boy, Mr. Mighty Policemen? There are enough bad characters in this city – thugs, murderers, thieves, gamblers, drunkards – why not go after them instead? Why not start with those drunkards playing cards in that corner over there. They make life unsafe for us who live in this locality, we are all afraid to come to this park because of them.(Desai 105)

Hari's plan to benefit the society

Hari's attachment to the rustic life was unflinching right from the beginning. Even though he left for Bombay amidst desperate situation and began to work in the city he always cared for his village. At times he felt homesick. In the monsoon

when heavy rain lashed the city a fierce storm broke out some fishermen were reported to be missing and dead on radio. Hari was very sad on hearing the news that this incident happened off the Alibagh coast which was not very far from his village. It was despite the fact that his father had abandoned fishing and surely was not among those feared dead, he kept on worrying incessantly. His first reaction was "That's my home! That's my land!" The fact that he was deeply moved by the tragic incident underlines his empathy for his fellow villagers and it was here that Hari transcends the narrow ideology of brotherhood and figures as a Universalist.

"It was true that his father was not in one of those boats, and that his family owned none. But it was the men from his village who went out fishing, and it could be men he knew friends or neighbours, who were lost." (Desai 121)

Mr. Panwallah advised Hari that change is the law of nature and he must understand it. The upcoming factories need not be considered as a threat instead he must see the innumerable opportunities it would bring to the villagers. He illustrated his philosophy of change with examples that have a few parallels in literary milestones. He said that millions of years ago when the earth was in the process of formation it was covered with water. However, when the land began to form in the process of evolutions, all the aquatic creatures stepped out and began to crawl on the land; they adapted to the change. Later, as the vegetation was not sufficient and hence to cope with their food need, they hunted animals and ensured their survival. He told that even the city of Bombay had been changing rapidly and many people adapted to this change without grudging. Fifty years ago it was a city of greenery and now it was reduced to a city of tall buildings where birds made nests. So he exhorted Hari to adapt to the changing circumstances and explore career options in the rapidly urbanized Thul. He advised Hari that he should be ready to switch over to other ecofriendly occupations like poultry or watchmending.

Conclusion

Anita Desai's main emphasis in this novel is the development of a poor village boy in the city of

Mumbai. She forcefully points out that there are good and bad people in this world. Her protagonist, Hari, leaves his hometown on account of lack of options and makes for Bombay. He acquires professional skills and self-development but gradually feels disillusioned with the crowd, filth, pollution and inhumanity associated with the urban life. Therefore, with great optimism and confidence he comes home and unites with his family. Now he cherishes plans to work for the society that he hated a year ago. However, the writer skillfully skipped romantic love affairs that we usually find in most of the novels of this category. Thus the narrative of this novel fulfills most of the criteria of a standard bildungsroman.

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