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## Marxist Concerns in Anita Desai's the Village by the Sea

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### Abstract

*The superstructure is seen by Marxist critical theory as a reflection of a society's socioeconomic circumstances. As a superstructure expression, literature serves as a tool to uphold the hegemonic structure or to challenge authoritarian ideas that uphold the socio-cultural status quo. The present study is based on the theoretical framework of Marxist critical theory, which focuses on the class struggle and the bourgeoisie's subsequent oppression of the proletariat. An analysis has been conducted to determine how and to what extent Anita Desai's novel A Village by the Sea mirrors the socioeconomic circumstances that underlie the story, including poverty, exploitation of the working class, and class conflict. The research examines Marxist components in the chosen fiction and provides a brief overview of Marxism. The theoretical foundation for this study is composed of the fundamental ideas of Marxist critical theory. The majority of people in the village of Thul make their living from farming and fishing. They are worried by the news that a massive factory will be erected in their village. They are excited by the prospect of new employment prospects, but they are also beginning to worry about the industrialization that would supplant their huts, meadows, and agricultural fields. What worries them the most is that the pollution from manufacturers will pollute the water and kill the fish. The study draws attention to a number of Marxist issues, chief among them being the struggle between the ruling class and the working class.*

**Keywords:** *Marxism, dialectical materialism, exploitation, class-war, industrialization.*

### Introduction

Speaking from the context-based position, art in general and literature in particular reflects the material conditions of a society. No adequate understanding is possible as long as literature is viewed as aloof from socio-economic realities. It has political overtones, often implicit, and it is meant either to deconstruct the hegemonic power relations and associated ideologies or it may simply serve as a tool for propagating dominant ideology of the powerful elites. The notion that literature is a material entity and literary productions are determined by the socio-economic and socio-political conditions establishes the crux of Marxist critical theory as Diyanni (1998) argues that Marxist critics generally approach literary works as products of their era, especially as influenced, even determined by the economic and political ideology that prevail at the time of their composition. In the analysis of literary works, therefore, it is important to decipher the nuances of ideologies and how they are embedded in social structure. To affirm this, Ngara (1985) remarks that literature equips its readers with the ability to grasp the nature of ideology

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of an epoch because the latter is socially and historically established. That is to say that the literary productions are characterized by specific historical circumstances and material conditions. "Although they have an autonomous existence and are produced by individuals who may hold divergent view about life, they have a more or less direct relationship with historical development" (p.21). The critical appreciation of a literary text is, therefore, dependent upon how we relate it to material conditions, historical circumstances, class struggles and other ideologies of the times where that text has been created or produced.

Central to the Marxist exegesis of texts is the concept of ideology and its relationship with literature and the literary artist. It becomes important to explore and examine how an author relates to the prevalent ideologies. Marx posits that the superstructure is shaped or interpellated by the economic base and the superstructure has ideological underpinnings, that is to say that ideology functions as a part of the superstructure. Within a capitalist mode of economy, the ideologies will support and justify the capitalist mode of production, the nature of established relationships and ethical structure. Ideology becomes a tool in the hands of the capitalist elites through which the mindset of the masses is manipulated. It is in the same vein that Engles (1892) affirms that ideology works as an illusion that masks the objective situation. The illusion created by ideology, he maintains, creates false consciousness in people. Eagleton, the leading contemporary Marxist critic, endorses this view of ideology. "Ideology is not in the first place a set of doctrines; it signifies the way men live out their roles in class society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and prevent them a true knowledge of society as a whole (Eagleton,1976, p.16). About literature, he says that it is nothing "but ideology in a certain aesthetic form-that works of literature are just expressions of the ideologies of their time" (ibid.)

In fact, it can safely be argued that from Marxist perspective, literature foregrounds classism, reflects the struggle between 'haves' and 'have-nots' and reinforces or undermines the dominant elitist ideology. People having substantial operative capital and power exploit dominant ideological apparatuses to their end and thus exploit and oppress the lower classes and this results in social disparity, poverty and injustice. The lower classes remain suppressed and marginalized unless they rise up and wage revolution against their exploiters. Their marginality, however, is perpetuated through repressive ideologies which keep the lower class people ignorant of realities and content with their existing lot. This paper is an attempt to study the novel *The Village by the Sea* by Anita Desai in Marxist perspective with special focus on the categories of classism and exploitation. Set in the backdrop of a rural area of Bombay, India, the narrative is presented through a poor family where a thirteen year old girl named Lila is the eldest of her four siblings. She is close friend of her brother Hari whom she can share her feelings. They have to look after an ailing mother who grows weaker day by day due to anemia and malnourishment. Poverty reigns in almost the whole village and it is precisely what debars Hari and his sister from going to school. Their father drinks a lot and thus, pays no heed towards family matters. "Their father, who has been out of work for months, is in a permanent drunken stupor, from which he arises occasionally to shout at his family" (Sumika, 2007). Village women pray to a 'rock' for the safety of the fishermen. Bulk of village population is deprived of basic amenities of life and the families hardly make both ends meet. They hear about the advent of industrialization in their village. Initially they take it as good news since it will entail happy prospects in terms of many job opportunities. But when they are given the details about the process of building factory and the nature of jobs they will most probably have, they feel shocked. They don't want industrialized place with all the traditional beauty and rustic way of life gone. Sea, the breadwinner and fertile fields of the village will be no more there. They decide to register their complaint with the high-ups sitting in Bombay. Hari goes

with the group too. Seeing their protest falling flat, he decides to stay there because as a matter of fact, with two younger sisters to take care of as well as their mother, life for him is not easy. There is a constant need for money as the family is almost always in debt. He thinks it is Bombay where his dreams may come true and ambition yields. Lila has to shoulder the responsibility of attending to her family members. Since it is not easy at all to make both ends meet, the emergence of the rich De Silva comes about as a good omen for the family. Hari, on the other hand, finds a source of assistance in the person of Jagu who gives him job in his restaurant. His happy encounter with Mr. Panwallah and De Silva's rendering of consistent help take the narrative forward.

The novel understudy gives an elaborate description of how tradition is being replaced by modernity and how in the name of industrialization havoc is being played with the environment. Through present research, the researchers will attempt to glean out the elements of social oppression and class war as portrayed in the novel "The Village by the Sea" by Anita Desai. The study will foreground the concerns such as class war, poverty, exploitation and social discrimination in the light of the assumptions provided by Marxist critical theory. This research is likely to bridge an important research gap because previously the novel understudy has not been analyzed from this perspective. The research will serve as an important academic contribution to the existing knowledge on fiction.

## **Research Questions**

- i. How does the novel *The Village by the Sea* reinforce Marxist ideology?
- ii. What are the major Marxist concerns in the novel understudy?

## **Significance of the Study**

This research study will help critics to understand the application of Marxist principles and theories in analyzing literary works. This study is likely to benefit the research scholars and critics in explaining the ideological orientation of the writer by analyzing the Marxist elements presented in the novel. It will bridge an important gap since the novel has not been explored through this angle. It will add to the existing literary criticism on the selected fiction. Moreover and most importantly, this study will provide an opportunity for other researchers, who plan to conduct a literary research in ideological assessment of literary works, by making itself as a reference material.

## **Research Methodology**

The study is limited to the analysis of one novel of Anita Desai from Marxist critical position. Research being focussed on the qualitative analysis of the novel, the close reading method has been used. Further, theoretical sources related to the topic have been collected particularly literature related to Marxism and its key assumptions. For the sake of making the analysis focussed and systematic, important relevant passages have been extracted from the novel as textual evidence. Finally, interpretations in line with the framework have been made so as to arrive at certain conclusions. In the following lines, the theoretical concepts of Marxism, Bourgeoisie and Proletariat, Ideology and Dialectical Materialism have been elaborated. The insights related to these concepts form a theoretical framework for analysis. It is pertinent to present an elaboration of the framework in accordance with the purpose of the current study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Marxism emerged from two German sociologists, Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). The Marxist theory believes in the structure of a society which ought to be free from all sorts of class consciousness and a society that is built purely on the basis of common ownership of means of production, their distribution and exchange. Marxism argues that society is literally hijacked by capitalist economic system and the working class largely remains deprived and alienated. The capitalists manipulate the working class and fill their coffers by exploiting their labour. All what they are bent on is the act of profit-making. The sole purpose of Marxism is to build an equitable, classless society where all social distinctions become obliterated. Marx and Engels laid the foundations of this critical stance and jointly presented the communist version of political economy. Marx and Engels announced the advent of communism in their jointly written Communist Manifesto of 1848. Marxism laid stress on making changes to the societal structure in order to have a classless society. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it". "It is not the consciousness of men that determine their being, but on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness" (Seldon, 1985, p.23). As Catharine and Mackinnon write, "Marxist theory argues that society is fundamentally constructed of the relations people form as they do and make things needed to survive humanly. Work is the social process of shaping and transforming the material and social worlds, creating people as social beings as they create value. It is that activity by which people become who they are". (Catharine A. MacKinnon, 1982, p.515). In fact, Marx wanted to establish a society known for equality and social coherence. He wanted to see a society free from all types of exploitations. Based on the ideas of Marxism, Marxist literary theory can generally be described as an "economic" approach to interpreting literary texts. It aligns itself with the basic premise of Marxist theory whereby it is established that every structure and superstructure is determined by the base which is economic. In other words, each and every socio-political reality in the external world is shaped by economic base. The same critical lens is used to examine literary works wherein under the surface workings of economics, material maneuverings and ideological manipulations are unearthed. The basis intent to do so is to foreground class war, social disparity, exploitation and oppression. The core concern of Marxist theory is to see how these works reflect the broader economic cum political system that engenders injustice and inequality. It also posits that literature may either critique or support the capitalist mode of production. It highlights class war and social relations embedded in material conditions. In fact, literature is seen "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams, 1999, p.149).

## **Bourgeoisie & Proletariat**

According to Booker (1996), "The division of labour leads to the development of class society, in which the population of a society is divided into separate classes whose need and desires may be fundamentally at odds" (p.72). The resistance of working classes toward oppression from the capitalist sometimes triggers a revolution in which working class wants to change their life. The bourgeoisie owners accumulate wealth through exploitation of the proletariat. They exploit their labour; impose high taxes and the economic disparity results in the creation of master-slave relations. The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an

uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (Marx & Engels, 1848, p.14).

Bourgeoisie are the owners of property and means of production whereas the proletariat are the workers. They work for their survival but through their labour the owners gain maximum profit rendering the workers alienated and deprived. The workers usually remain unaware of their rights and are scarcely motivated to wage a revolution. There are two principal reasons for this slumber. First, they are economically so much underprivileged that all they can think about is only their survival. They are compelled not to think of anything other than ‘filling their bellies’. They remain struggling throughout their lives for fulfilling basic human needs. Secondly, the capitalists (mis)use several ideologies to keep them satisfied with their lot. The working class usually remains unable to see through these oppressive ideologies which operate in favour of the bourgeoisie. Due to this economic unevenness, society becomes prey to several crimes like poverty, stealth, robbery, murder and injustice etc.

## **Dialectical Materialism**

Marx was of the view that society with its particular economic system essentially entails contradictions and conflicts. He argues that since the capitalists exploit the labour so the economic relations between the owners and workers are based on unfairness or inequality. This conflicting relation, dormant for the time being, might get triggered and thus lead to a revolution. So the capitalist system contains the risk for the owner himself. “...the unfairness is the self-destruction for the system itself because the working class will eventually ask for equality which leads them to resist and struggle to get their right” (Brooke,1996, p.72). The unstated assumption in Brooke’s argument is that the conflict between opposing ideas is dialectical in nature. That is to say that every idea is contrasted by its opposite and the conflict is resolved through the creation of another idea. This takes us to the Hegelian logic where an idea is established as a thesis whose opposite is famously referred to as the anti-thesis. Both thesis and anti-thesis exist and function in dialectical relationship to each other. The resolution between the two is marked by synthesis which perpetuates the historical flow and becomes a thesis itself inviting new opposition. In social context, there is conflict between the varying needs of the social classes. Marx is of the opinion that since the needs of the working classes are not met owing to the hegemonic and dominant role of the upper classes, there exists a dichotomy and opposition. This opposition will lead to a kind of revolution which will be initiated by the working class. They will rise from the chains and burdens of exploitation and oppression and will herald the birth of socialist society. The latter will put an end to all kinds of inequalities and the idea of classless society will be materialised. “The new classless society will lack the class conflict of previous ones, resulting in the end of the dialectical movement of history and permanent establishment of socialism” (ibid). If the working class ultimately succeeds in overthrowing the bourgeoisie, the society will enter a classless phase which in turn, will ensure equality, fairness and justice.

## **Analysis & Discussion**

When viewed through Marxist lens, the novel *The Village by the Sea* can be seen as offering an emerging conflict between the poor working class and the capitalists. Though there transpires no blatantly bloody struggles between the two but the way the rustics are presented as living on the edges of marginality and their prospective apprehensions about being deprived of their

verdant lands certainly point towards their vulnerability to capitalistic onslaught. From socio-economic point of view, these villagers seem to be a singled-out community and their position is such that their exploitation is nearly always on the cards. The village remains peaceful and serene and its dwellers lead a smooth natural life until the land-mafia appears on the scene. The mafia consists of a group of capitalists/industrialists. They visit the village by the sea frequently and make necessary arrangements for establishing an industry. The simpleton villagers are given incentives in terms of future jobs, developmental works, educational and health facilities etc. and are convinced that the factory would ensure progress for the area. This is characteristic of creating what Marx referred to as the false consciousness. The workers come to believe that factory would change their lives positively without first thinking that the natural loss will not be recoverable. However, when the things get started, the to-be owners of new property betray their promises. They announce that the houses and huts have to be demolished in the 'best' interest of the villagers, though it will be in the interests of the bourgeoisie alone. The very news that a factory is going to be built in their village after razing down their huts and demolishing their lands is most unpleasant. They don't want to get meager jobs of laborers at the cost of their fields, homes and pastures. "Every one of us is threatened. Our land is going to be taken away. Where we grow coconuts and good rice for our families, they want to build their factories. Our crops will be destroyed so that their factories can come up instead" (Desai, 1992, p.62). They develop a sense of loss straightaway. Not only will they be deprived of their houses and fields but they will lose a sense of freedom and autonomy. Peasants working on the fields, taking care of their crops and cattle would induce in them a sense of ownership and belonging. They would work independently. But now onwards they would become slave workers. In fact, they were going to be enslaved on their own lands.

Villagers' apprehensions are not only about the material losses but also about the intangible. Their displeasure is in fact a tacit assumption that the values they adhered to, the holiness of personal relations and feelings of love despite being poor will flee away with the coming of industrialization. "Village life with the advent of modern technology and machinery becomes commercial. Consequently, the purity and chastity of human love is violated. The happy married life is richer and better in Thul without industrial development" (Ansari, 2013, p.576). They become well aware of the fact that modernity along its technological and industrial development will bring money at the cost of the wealth of love, joy and peace. Besides, the so-called modern development would be carried out at the cost of immense natural loss and the industrialists had not chalk out any plans for making up for that loss. Hundreds of trees were to be felled; the smoke from the factory around the clock would make environment polluted; the poisonous chemicals would make water contaminated and not only human life but the other fauna and flora would be badly affected. But the capitalists had one agenda namely money-making and profit-making by exploiting resources – human, natural and material. The villagers are briefed about the prospective losses once the factory is built on their agricultural land. The individual from Bombay further states that the building of industry will not only mar the beauty of their farming areas but they will not be able to continue to earn through traditional ways of farming. In fact, their mode of earning livelihood will be drastically changed. This instills in them a realization and they come together and plan a protest against the ruthless industrialization of their lands endowed with natural beauty. Through protest they try to reach out to those who could hear their voice and step in to hamper such moves. Here, the working class rises up against the oppressors and tries to preclude its subversion. The capitalists are bent on sucking the blood of the oppressed and of manipulating the things for the purpose of social control over the other classes.

The protest may well be taken as a demonstration or a way by which an oppressive ideological regime can be countered and overcome. Such small-scale protests, however, usually fall flat because the capitalists hold power in the form of personnel in the corridors of power. Very often, the machinery of government has its own stakes and they make every possible effort to thwart any rebellion. The stranger from the city, the spokesman of the ruling class, categorically informs these people that they will not be taken on board as to whether an industrial set-up be established in the village Thul or not. On being asked as to what would become of the village and villagers, he replies, “The stranger laughed and chopped at the air with his hand as if he were cutting down weed. Like that – your village will go” (Desai, 1992, p.61). The stranger seems to be right since nothing hampers the capitalists in achieving their ends. The villagers’ protest remains a failure. They knock at the doors of government for the protection of the property but to no avail. The coconut seller rightly puts in, “Do you think the government has eyes and can see? I tell you, the government has only a mouth with which it eats – eats our taxes, eats our land, eats the poor” (p.85). Hari and other villagers soon begin to realize the worthlessness of their campaign. “The politicians won – so they can make a plenty of money from the sale of land and licenses in the name of progress. Thul is lost. Everything is doomed. The fish in the sea will die from the effluents that will be pumped into the water. The paddy fields will be built over by factories and houses and streets”(p.154).

Hari’s meeting with Mr. Pan Walla, an inspiring character to the boy, enables him to view the things from a different angle. It is he who teaches him to look at life optimistically. Panwalla, like others, has been brainwashed by the capitalists. He has not seen consequences yet but he exhausts the benefits of industrial set-up in the village. The fruits of industrialization are automatic and non-negligible but they are realized at a big cost. Panwalla seems to have no idea how bigger the villagers have paid the price for it. And besides, he parrots about the prospective benefits as the promises made by the industrialists before taking up the project. He tells Hari that as he is equipped with the skill of watch-mending, he will surely be able to capitalize on it. Once the houses and colonies for the factory employees are built, there will be several opportunities for Hari too. “There will be plenty of work. They will even bring watches and clocks with them for you to repair. So your watch-mending skills won’t be useless afterall” (p.128). Pan Walla’s suggestions to Hari may well be deemed as an inability to see through covert capitalist agenda and ultimate powerlessness of the downtrodden to stop exploitative strategies of the ruling class. The solace he gives that all’s going to be well or all’s well with the world speaks of their oppressed and suppressed mindset that impedes them to effect any change in their favor. After having lost their case, Hari has no other option than to visualize the benefits of industrialization now. In the final chapter, he tries to convince the birdwatcher who is very much doleful at the herald of the building of factories in the village. “My little *baya* birds will find no more paddy leaves for their nests or grain or food for their young. They will have to fly away. I may not see them another year” (p.154). The birdwatcher being a member of the oppressed working class simply puts the things in a nutshell. “The birds are the last free creatures on earth. Everything else has been captured and tamed and enslaved – tigers behind the bars of the zoos, lions stared at by crowds in safari parks, men and women in houses like matchboxes working in factories that are like prisons” (p.154). It is not only humans who are disturbed but nature, being the natural habitat for a number of animals and birds becomes an uninhabitable space. Social discrimination, therefore, is not only meted out to human beings but also the other species. The factory owners along with their allies sitting in the corridors of power never bother to think beyond their material interests and profits. They exploit the labour of the working classes, pollute the environment, dump poisonous chemicals in the open,

disturb sea life, play havoc with the natural habitats of several species and above all, make no arrangements to compensate for the loss at least to some extent. They fill their pockets with burgeoning profit in the name of industrial developments.

## Conclusion

The researchers employed Marxist assumptions as a theoretical framework for the study to analyze the novel *The Village by the Sea* by Anita Desai. By using textual method of analysis, the researchers culled out passages and quotes from the novel as textual evidences to support or substantiate research argument. The Marxist reading of the novel understudy has revealed that this work tacitly reinforces Marxist ideology namely the class divide whereby the bourgeoisie (factory owners) are bent on exploiting the working classes (villagers) first by grabbing their lands and huts and then turning a peaceful, clean and serene natural habitat into a filthy, uninhabitable and polluted place. The industrialists with their oppressive ideology hardly bother to take into account the reservations of the proletariat. All they are bent on is to exploit them in order to attain their ends. People of village Thul believe that with the establishment of industrial setup in their locality, they would be deprived of their lands and houses; and the sea-water, their bread-winner, would be contaminated. They strongly believe that their rustic life is after all peaceful, unpolluted and tranquil no matter how much poor they are. What perturbs them most is the prospective loss of traditional way of life, cultural beauty and their cherished values.

In response to the second question, the analysis leads to affirm that several Marxist concerns like conflicting relationship between the rich and the poor, poverty, helplessness, class divide and social cum economic discrimination are conspicuously operative in the society portrayed in the novel. The conflict between the ruling class and the working lot rises in the form of the protest launched by the latter. However, it doesn't have that strength and power to persuade the high-ups to revert the decision. Hari, the protagonist, changes his mind after a continual discussion with pan Walla as he begins to view industrialization from an optimistic angle. Job opportunities, rise in business activities and improved infrastructure are not bad things even at the cost of crop-producing lands, dilapidated houses and verdant pastures. The villagers have no other option than to adapt themselves to the changing environment as pan Walla suggests "if you want to survive, you will have to change too" (p.129). It may also be taken as a kind of surrender to the ruling class that usually encourages status quo. From an ideological stand point, the novel exhibits author's commitment to material conditions especially the economic realities. She critiques, though implicitly, the power relations and their unsatiated lust for material gains at the cost of common human joys. The underlying assumption is to lay emphasis on equal distribution of the wealth and the need for social revolution in bringing about a happy, bright and promising future to the people of the low social class. Exploration of the themes and ideological apparatuses is reflective of the author's progressive mindset and it is evident that she advocates prosperity and equality. It could also be said that she has not merely expressed the material realities of her time but has also tried to project her ideological vision of classless society.

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