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Ecological Consciousness In Coastal Fisher Communities: A Literary Study Of Anita Desai's *The Village By The Sea*

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Abstract: This research analyses the issue of ecological consciousness and environmental awareness through the lens of coastal fisher communities as portrayed in Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea*. The novel, set in the fishing village of Thul located near Bombay, focuses on the complex interconnection of human livelihood and the presence of a natural environment. Utilising an ecocritical lens, this chapter examines Desai's representation of the Sea, land, and seasonal cycles of nature, not simply as geographical locations, but as lively elements that play a role in shaping the moral and economic framework of village life. This study employs qualitative literary analysis, focusing on the relationship to nature, traditional fishing modes of life, and the broader consequences of modernisation that threaten environmental stability. This chapter elaborates on how Desai emphasises sustainability, positioning the villagers' respect for natural cycles in stark contrast to industrial development encroaching on village life, simultaneously threatening both ecological and cultural stability. Collectively, the results illustrate Desai's text as an early warning of ecological turning points, from the loss of indigenous environmental ethics to the pressures of global industrialisation. Overall, through the positioning of *The Village by the Sea* in a broader conversation surrounding eco-literature and postcolonial ecological studies, this paper illustrates the text's contribution to understanding the moral and cultural dimensions of human-nature relations in coastal settings.

Index Terms - Ecological consciousness, coastal literature, livelihood, environmental ethics, sustainability, Anita Desai, *The Village by the Sea*, ecocriticism

I. INTRODUCTION

The coastal areas of India present a complex interplay of human and environmental relations, where social and cultural practices of livelihood, belief systems, and survival have evolved in tandem with and in response to the Sea and its life. While fishing communities have remained at the margins of society, their cultural life has been firmly rooted in the life the Sea affords them. Increasingly, however, the delicate relationship between human need and marine ecology has been disrupted by industrial development, pollution, and unregulated modernization. Consequently, marine biodiversity faces multiple levels of danger, while traditional knowledge systems, which helped maintain a balance with the environment, have eroded.

Within Indian English literature, several writers have expressed this state of confrontation between the community and its environment. However, there has been no similar scholarship considering the environmental dimensions or implications in coastal and fisher narratives more broadly. Critical analyses that study Indian coastal writing tend to focus on economic injustice or social realism. Hence, ecological consciousness remains largely overlooked. In the case of regional literatures, particularly coastal writing, there is a notable lack of sustained scholarship that positions literary representations in relation to environmental ethics or sustainable practices. It opens up the possibility for extended and comparative work to examine how fiction represents and critiques the human experience of the Sea as both provider and threat. Anita Desai's novel, *The Village by the Sea*, creates a meaningful arena for this exploration. Despite it being set in a Western coastal village, its

portrayal of fishermen, changing ways of life, and industrial encroachment reflects a similar ecological and socio-economic predicament that many coastal communities in various parts of India experience.

This research, therefore, seeks to examine how *The Village by the Sea* constructs an ecological consciousness through a consideration of fishing culture, environmental vulnerability, and the moral consciousness of coastal life. The research focuses on the following research questions: In what ways does Desai convey the interdependence of human life and the natural world in the fishing village of Thul? In what ways does the novel present tension between traditional ecological knowledge and industrial modernity? In what ways does Desai's narrative inform contemporary discussions of environmental ethics and sustainability in coastal contexts? In engaging with this inquiry, this paper situates *The Village by the Sea* within the broader field of ecocriticism and coastal cultural studies, aiming to expand the literary conversation surrounding ecological and moral consciousness in postcolonial Indian narratives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past several decades, coastal literatures in India have garnered critical attention as scholars shift away from social realism to examine how narrative forms represent human-environment relationships. Earlier readings of coastal fiction have tended to focus on poverty, family and intimate relationships, and social and community rituals. In contrast, the recent ecocritical turn has led to many coastal texts being framed as sites for the staging of environmental knowledge, the loss of ecological knowledge, and ethical reflection. An ecocritical reading of *The Village by the Sea* interprets Anita Desai's text as part of this shift, suggesting that Desai portrays the village landscape as an active moral force and that the fishing economy is closely tied to the seasonal and meteorological changes. Such readings foreground the novel's ability to demonstrate ongoing sustainability practices that are often embedded in everyday life, as well as the deleterious consequences of new industrial encroachment. [The Criterion+1](#)

Comparative scholarship often aligns regional classics, such as *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, with Anglophone works to map converging patterns: the Sea as provider and agent, ritual injunctions regulating exploitation, and communal proscriptions signalling ecological wisdom. Additionally, critics have examined *Chemmeen* through ecofeminism and transcendentalism, enabling us to see how the mythological, taboo, and communal mnemonic operating in the novel's symbolic economy holds onto a storehouse of ecological social value even as modernity continues to get rid of customary limits concerning the preservation of dignity. In sum, these comparative traditionally contextualised studies demonstrate that coastal literature can function as both ethnographic evidence and ethical engagement. [Zenodo+1](#)

Academics investigating Indian coastal ecocriticism, promoting frameworks that connote cultural ecology, Tinai theory (landscape-based genres) and postcolonial environmentalism. The Tinai idea has recently received renewed critical attention as a way to tie landscape, livelihood, and affect (this is particularly useful in my reading of Fisher narratives about the co-constitutive relationship between environment and culture). Such theorising promotes readings that centre on local ecological knowledge (LEK) and customary livelihoods, rather than relegating them to a mere access or descriptive role in literature. [IJCRT](#)

The literary interventions in question are informed and grounded in empirical studies of small-scale fisheries and the knowledge of fisherfolk. Research on fishermen's local ecological knowledge, their perceptions of climate, and their adaptive strategies indicates coastal communities hold significant observational knowledge of tides, monsoonal patterns, and fish behaviour. This shapes the fishing calendars, observances of taboos, and modes of communal resource sharing. As a result, literary critics are increasingly drawing on empirical studies to determine whether fiction validates, critiques, or expands local environmental practices. [SpringerLink+1](#)

An important area of discussion is the political economy of fisheries: how mechanisation, market integration and industrial projects change access to ocean resources and undermine customary rights. Research on coastal conflict and resource governance offers insight into how litigation, the designation of a marine sanctuary, or commercial trawling can displace small fishers. Literary texts that narrativise factory encroachment, dispossession, or market pressures are then interpreted as interventions in political economies, providing evidence of the socioecological costs of so-called "development." [SSRN+1](#)

Ali, Mohammed. An Eco-Marxist Analysis of Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea*. This paper assesses Desai's novel from an Eco-Marxist perspective, following connections of capitalist expansion, industrial encroachment, and ecological degradation. Factory expansion becomes symptomatic of broader processes that

commodify natural resources, resulting in the dispossession of small-scale producers. This source can provide a frame for the novel's portrayal of industrial hazard within debates on political economy and environmental justice.

Vitthal, M. B. R. "Ecological Concern in Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea*." *Epitome Journals*, 2019. Vitthal provides a focused textual reading emphasising how Desai renders nature as an ethical agent and how village practices embody ecological knowledge. The essay is useful for close reading support, especially in terms of imagery, seasonal structure, and the novel's moral ecology. Refer to this when mapping textual passages to theoretical claims about stewardship and local practices.

This argument leads to three recommendations for a literary reading of *The Village by the Sea*: (1) to read the novel's depictions of seasonal practice and ritual as modeled forms of embodied local ecological knowledge; (2) to anchor those depictions against empirical studies of fisher knowledge and political-economic pressures; and (3) to utilise comparative texts (i.e., *Chemmeen*) to draw attention to, and potentially make new kinds of links, between textual strategies that coastal literatures use to make sense of sustainability, loss, and resilience.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs an ecocritical framework that synthesizes concepts from cultural ecology, environmental justice, and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) to examine how *The Village by the Sea* conveys ecological consciousness and moral agency within its fishing communities. As a literary and cultural theory, ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. Cheryll Glotfelty writes, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996), a term that encourages us to read texts not simply as cultural artefacts but as reflections of the ecological realities and crises that structure human life. Greg Garrard defines ecocriticism further by stating that it places literature in "an embedded, interconnected system in which human and non-human have been co-evolving" (Garrard 2012). By examining Desai's representation of Thul village through ecocriticism, we can see that it is situated within an interconnected biological and social context in which environmental degradation and social inequity coexist.

As a sub-branch of ecocriticism, cultural ecology studies the adaptation of human societies to their natural environments through cultural practices. Hubert Zapf observes that literature serves as a "cultural-ecological force," which can help to restore equilibrium by rethinking the bond between humans and nature (Zapf 2016). In Desai's novel, *The Village by the Sea*, we find that fishing is both a cultural and ecological act, one that entails respect for the rhythms of the Sea, and also highlights the fragility of these cultural-ecological adaptations in the face of industrial encroachment. This framework also engages with theories of environmental justice, which are concerned with how marginalized communities are often the recipients of the most burdensome ecological consequences of environmental practices. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" identifies the hidden effects of environmental catastrophe, which take time to manifest, on communities confronting the ecological practices of environmental exploitation (Nixon 2011). The fisherman, facing pollution and urban encroachment, is another relevant perspective here, as there are paradigms of development that marginalise those who rely most on ecological stability for their survival.

Lastly, the research incorporates Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which is the collective knowledge, practices, and beliefs developed over time within a community through its relationship with the environment. Berkes describes TEK as a holistic understanding of ecosystem management, driven by cultural persistence and ethical obligations (Berkes 2018). The characters of Desai's text, particularly the fishing families, represent this indigenous ecological knowledge, organising their lives in accordance with the natural cycles of the Sea and the seasons. By incorporating these theoretical perspectives, the study positions *The Village by the Sea* within a wider conversation of environmental humanities. It reads the novel as an ecological text, not only in terms of its social struggle, but also in terms of the moral universe and cultural elements of human relationships with nature.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative literary analysis, based on close reading and thematic discourse analysis of "The Village by the Sea" by Anita Desai. The study interprets aspects of the novel's narrative structure, imagery, and characterisation to identify threads of ecological consciousness and ethical commitment through the lives and experiences of the fishermen community. The textual and contextual approach aims to

connect literary understanding with observational data; narratives of cultural context can be explored as leverage for environmental awareness and sustainability.

V. Fishermen Communities in The Village by the Sea

Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* (1982) depicts a coastal fishing community in Thul, a small village situated outside of Bombay. The narrative provides a detailed view of the inhabitants' socio-economic status and their ecological relationships. The villagers, particularly families such as Hari and Lila's, rely on artisanal fishing and subsistence farming for their primary sources of livelihood (Desai 15). Fishing is not just a job for the villagers; it dictates how they structure their everyday lives, shaped by tidal cycles, the monsoon, and seasonal patterns. Desai demonstrates how life is embedded in these patterns that reflect traditional ecological knowledge by detailing the fishermen's observations of fish, weather, and seasonal changes, as well as their sustainable hunting practices (Vitthal 3).

The novel also highlights the socio-economic precariousness of coastal fisherfolk. The families' oppressive poverty, lack of access to education, and reliance on absent marine resources reflect contemporary small-scale fishing communities (Ali 12). The threat of industries encroaching on fishing spaces, as represented in the village by the calculations of a nearby fertiliser factory and urbanization, endangers their livelihoods and ecological circumstances. The workers' lives reflect questions of overfishing and the marginalization of small-scale fishing, habitual rights, and social stratification (Nixon 6). These structures operate like displacement and inequality, as conceptualized in empirical research on modern coastal communities (Senapati and Gupta 14). Belief systems and practices of culture are essential components of the villagers' ecological consciousness. Their resource management has emotional aspects based on rituals, local taboos, and collective commitment to the Sea, which facilitate ethical engagement in human-nature relationships. The writing illustrates how these practices can serve as informal systems of resource management, sustaining both the community and the surrounding environment. By situating human life within an ecological succession and incorporating impressions of the threats posed of modernization, *The Village by the Sea* serves as a literary framework for understanding the intricacies of socio-economic pressures, environmental precariousness, and systems of traditional ecological knowledge in coastal fishery communities. It emphasizes, however, how cultural narratives and experiential stories combine to inform ecological consciousness and is thus a relevant primary source for exploring ecological consciousness, sustainable practices, and environmental ethics in coastal literature.

1. Representation of Sea and Nature:

In *The Village by the Sea*, Desai depicts the Sea not just as a physical presence but as a living entity that influences the moral and material lives of the villagers. The catharsis is often expressed in imagery and metaphor in relation to the Sea's double nature as benefactor and menace, as it sustains the fishers' livelihoods while exposing them to storms, scarcity, and nature's impending hazards (Vitthal 3). She observes seasonal cycles, the ebbs and flows of the tides, and monsoon rains with attention to detail that implies a complex interplay between people and the ecological cycles in which they are a part. The land, mangroves, hills, and coastal plain have been revitalized within a living and alive context of the village, serving as a moral frame of reference in terms of the community's resilience and vulnerability.

2. Traditional Knowledge, Ritual, and Taboo:

Desai shows how traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is infused in local customs and ritual practices. When families can, the movement of the tides governs the migration of fish, the moon cycle, and the timing of the monsoons; likewise, certain taboos limit the overfishing of particular fish species or areas. Desai's account demonstrates that these customs serve both utilitarian and moral-dimension purposes, strengthening community cohesion and sustainably utilizing those resources. For example, Hari's family follows the seasonal rhythms for fishing and farming, reflecting an indigenous knowledge system aimed at maintaining an ecological equilibrium over time rather than maximizing short-term economic gain (Desai 18).

3. Livelihood, Technology, and Change:

The advent of mechanization and market forces from the urban center disrupts their traditional lifestyle. Desai uses the fertilizer factory as the symbol of industrialization, which changes fishing practices and the way people find work and earn money (Nixon 6). Families with resource-dependent livelihoods, relying on small-scale artisanal means, are now facing overfishing and economic pressures that threaten their

traditional lifestyles. Economic pressures, which are straining the fragile marine ecosystem, are making it increasingly difficult for cultural wisdom to thrive in the modern world (Ali 15).

4. Social Conflict and Environmental Degradation:

Conflict erupts both within the community, as well as externally as industrialisation and urban expansion erodes the village's ecological base...describing disagreements over the use of fishing locations, being affected by waste from factories, and disintegrating forms of customary rights, Desai illustrates the unequal impacts of extractive pressures on precarity fishers (Senapati and Gupta 14). The account acknowledges the slow and almost cumulative violence against the environment...similar to Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence", it highlights the ways marginal communities experience environmental harm with little to no recognition from politicians and policymakers.

5. Narratives of Care, Resistance, and Loss:

As the novel progresses, there are realisations of the villages displaying sadness, loss, care and concern for humans and the environment, suggesting the villagers demonstrate an understanding of their surroundings continuing the village's habit of fishing that can be traced to customary practices of fishing, while also attempting to maintain aspects of seasonal rest and care for one another during the lean years, not because it is how fishing has always been, but because they adopt a demonstrated care for the ecological consciousness they are embedded in (Vitthal 5). Resistance becomes stories of meticulous refusal to traditions, despite pressures and struggles, but also narratives of loss when discussing the effects of modernisation and degradation on both livelihood and sociocultural continuity.

This analysis of *The Village by the Sea* illustrates a complex relationship between written representation and the social and ecological realities in coastal fishing communities. Desai's representation of the Thul village is closely aligned with the socio-economic and ecological realities, as noted by Senapati and Gupta (14), in relation to the precarious livelihood of small-scale fishers in urbanising coastal areas. The book's representation of artisanal fishing practices, seasonal cycles of food, and community-imposed taboos introduces Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into the conversation by illustrating how local knowledge systems are situated at the intersection of human and environmental factors. The narrative reinforces the possibility that stewardship arises from cultural practices and aligns closely with Berkes' statement that TEK is ethically, practically and ecologically integrated.

Theoretical affordances include a deeper understanding of environmental grief and slow violence. Rob Nixon's (2011) concept is expressed through literary analysis in the suffering of villagers due to the impacts of industrial encroachment, the diminishing availability of fish, and the loss of health resulting from environmental degradation (Nixon 7). By articulating narratives of ecological loss and livelihood insecurity, Desai shifts the philosophical abstractions of environmental theorisation into human narratives, which capture the emotional and social aspects of ecological loss. The book also highlights the interdependence between cultural continuity and environmental sustainability, as well as the importance of relocation. It suggests that conservation is about people and cannot be separated from the moral and social determinants of communities.

These findings, from a policy perspective, support the integration of local ecological knowledge into fisheries management, as suggested in case studies of small-scale coastal fishers (Senapati and Gupta, 2014; Adiga, 2016). From an educational perspective, *The Village by the Sea* can be used as a piece of literature in environmental education to show how literature can be used to mediate understandings of ecological ethics, sustainable practices, and vulnerability to climate change.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how *The Village by the Sea* gives us an important perspective on the ecological consciousness of coastal fishing communities. This study analyses the text to demonstrate that TEK, ritualized stewardship, and ethical frameworks embedded in cultural traditions are essential for the sustainable use of resources. The study also identifies the social and emotional dimensions of environmental change, contributing to academic discussions of slow violence and environmental justice. Although being centered in literature limits its generalizability, situating this analysis in empirical studies will underscore its relevance. Future research could apply regional coastal literatures comparisons, explore gendered ecological knowledge, or conduct ethnographic fieldwork in conjunction with literary analysis to engage in further exploration of the intersections of culture, ecology, and resilience.

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