THE VILLAGE BY THE SEA : A DISCOURSE OF FEMININITY THAT ESPOUSES MONEY-POWER

The Village by the Sea (1982) has been described as 'a brilliant resonant story of change in older India'. But as it unfolds through the conflictual relationships of different discourses, it appears to offer no change for women. The wheel turns for men only. The narrative opens and closes with the discourse of spirituality in which the women belonging to the fishing community of the village Thul are seen to be performing morning prayers at the sea, rather than at the local temple. They appear to enjoy a sort of power and autonomy in this sort of religious practice because they are not to depend on the priests of the local temple who, as per Hindu religious norms, are expected to be paid for performing any religious act on their behalf. Their willing performances of the morning prayers for their husbands' or fathers' well-being or for a good start of the day show that they do not feel oppressed by the so-called spiritual domain of culture. On the contrary, Anita Desai resurrects the 'subjugated knowledge' of Lila, a burgeoning woman, as to why she silently refuses to be incorporated in the traditional religious role. Lila finds herself exposed to the knowledge that it is not spirituality but money that, like magic, can do everything possible. In making her refuse the spiritual role and thereby eschew the power of Indian spirituality, Anita Desai creates resistance to the discourse of the nationalist resolution of women's question that locates women in the inner sanctum of culture.

The text is constructed through the conflictual relationships of different discourses and practices. Mention may be made of the practice of the village women performing religious prayer at the sea, rather than in the temple, the discourse of Maharastra Government's schemes of industrialization in the villages adjacent to Bombay, the political and environmental discourses resisting the Government's industrial schemes, the city women's discourse of protest against Govt's price-hike of essential commodities, coconut-seller's discourse on masculinity, Mr Panwalla's admonitory discourses and so on. All these

discourses, by their claims to truths, produce Hari's subjectivity, whereas Lila's subjectivity, without being affected by these discourses, produces a discourse of femininity contra phallocentric discourse on femininity that locates women in the spiritual domain of Indian culture.

To begin with, the narrative focuses on Lila, a major female character, who is seen to be walking down to the sea with the small basket on the flat of her hand, filled with flowers that she would offer on the sacred rock, a kind of temple on the sea. She is very soon joined by many other village women. The latter pray for the safety of the fishermen at the sea, who are either their fathers or husbands. But Lila prays with the hope that the start of the day would be good. She does not feel an urge for a prayer for her father who is now a drunken fellow and has sold his boat to pay his debts. However, all the village women including Lila 'preferred to do it themselves' (8). This implies that in performing the act independently, they like to enjoy a sort of power and autonomy in the spiritual domain of culture.

In the material domain, 'only when the men are a failure, as is Lila's father, and only when the men are absent, do women assert their independence and their will. In the presence of their husbands, the only roles they play are those of wife and mother', says Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhandi (R.K. Dhawan (ed.) vol.4, 1991 : 44). In addition to Jamkhandi's observation about the women's situation in the fishing community, it is also observed that where there are debt and drunkenness, there are troubles for the women. Otherwise, the men and women maintain a good relationship between them. The women are heard to call their husbands as 'ourmen' (20) lovingly. This leads us to think that the women in the community do not feel to be oppressed by their husbands. But while they feel so, they also leave their husbands. The wives of the three brothers of the Khanekars bear evidence to the fact. After being oppressed by the drunkenness of the three brothers of the Khanekars, 'their wives had left them, and gone back to their parents in other villages. Only their old mother, Hira-bai, kept house for them' (49). Again, on the other hand, neither Hari and Lila can eschew their father, even though his debts and drunkenness create problems to the family : 'No one dared tell him, least of all her mother' (11). However, this makes it

clear that in this community debt and drunkenness are the main provenances of troubles for women.

Lila and Hari are the two major characters, both have been forced to stop going to school because of their father's debt. Lila, older than Hari, advises the latter to do something to save the family from disintegration because she knows that in the presence of male breadwinner the women's only role is to do the houseworks. However, she is hopeful that Hari is growing up and would soon be able to find work and earn money.

Hari is also made hopeful by the discourse of Government's project of industrialization that 'the Government is going to build a great factory here. Many factories; Hundreds of them' (13). Yet in the heart of his hearts Hari knows that he would leave Thul one day. Thul cannot hold him for long – at least not the Thul of the coconut groves and the fishing fleet. If it really turns into a factory site, he would stay on here to lead a new kind of life. Otherwise, he and his family would surely and slowly starve, fall ill like his mother and die. Despite this, he knows that, because of the social norms, his sisters would never look forward to working on a fishing boat or in a factory. They would have to marry oneday, and he would have to see to it since his father would not. He would have to find them husbands, and buy them their wedding finery and arrange their weddings to which the whole village would have to be invited. The bridegrooms might demand a dowry. How could he ever meet them? Even if he finds a job, he would never earn enough to buy them such riches. However, it is his realization that without a job he cannot find his sisters a way-out of the dark, gloomy house and the illness and drunkenness and the hopelessness that surround them like the shadows of the night. He also knows that he can never earn enough in Thul of green coconuts. He will have to go to Bombay to find his fortune, either with Mr de Silva's help or even without it. But how would he go there?

Hari no longer thinks of his sisters and sick mother. He is now obsessed with the thinking of going to Bombay. By this time he hears an MLA to Maharastra State Legislative Assembly countering the Government's project of industrialisation : The MLA's discourse is as follows :

> I have come from Alibagh to ask you to join us. We are all concerned in this matter – all of us who live here in these fourteen villages along the coast from Rewas to Alibagh. 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. All 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 fish for miles around. How will we live without our land, without sea? ... They will send their men to pacify you – to pacify you with lies. The men will tell you that you will get jobs. The factories will be run by engineers, by men with degrees from colleges in city. There may be a few jobs for similar people like us who have never gone to school but have spent our lives in producing food for other people ... They say they only need five hundred acres for their factories, but thousands more will be needed ... They will take at least two thousand five hundred acres from us of our best land. In return they will cut down our tall green coconut trees, destroy our paddy crops, kill the fish in the sea, and then we will be driven away because we will be no use to them. Can we let this happen to us (62-63).

This discourse produces a dilemma in Hari's mind. First, the discourse leads him to feel that he must stand beside his fellow villagers and fight for the right of the farmers and fishermen to earn their living by the traditional ways. Secondly, though he feels so, he is in dilemma because he cannot decide what he should do. There emerge two options before him. First, he can join the villagers and march to Bombay and take part in the protest against this taking over of their land and occupations. Secondly, he can take the part of the Government and the factory and try to find work there in the new, strange manner brought to them from the distant city. However, he overcomes his dilemma partly by his urge for going to Bombay and partly by his zeal of fighting for his land along with other villagers.

However, while he is in the procession on the streets of Bombay, he finds another procession of the city women pass directly in front of theirs. The scenario of these processions leads us to understand that the state power is more oppressive than any other power. Particularly the slogans of the autonomous organisation of the city women make it clear that for the city women the state power is more repressive than the phallic power, although 'they did not trust their men to manage for them' (76). The women's procession

also enables us to draw a line of difference between the city women and the village women. The city women are well organised to fight against any sort of oppression, particularly against repressive economic measure of the government, but the village women are not at all organised. Even when they fight against any oppression or repression, they fight individually. The problems with which the village women are concerned are considered as individual problems to be settled with their partners. It is perhaps due to their lack of contact with the outside world. Anyway, Hari, on the other hand, begins to gain in knowledge through his encounter with different discourses produced by the city women and the ornithologist, Sayyid Ali. From Sayyid Ali's discourse he comes to know that the rapid industrialisation in the surroundings of Bombay would destroy ecological balance.

After the dispersal of the procession, Hari begins to suffer from non-belongingness and aloneness. But his encounter with the coconutseller opens a new prospect before him. The latter, exposing Govt.'s cruelty and lackadaisicality, dispels Hari's illusion about the Govt. and thereafter he tries to activate his mind with a discourse of masculinity :

> 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 for myself – I'm a man and depend on myself. This is the best way to be, boy – free and independent. Don't say please, and don't say thank you – take what you want. Be a man, be independent (85).

This discourse of the coconutseller makes such a deep impact upon Hari that he wants to be his disciple. But on the coconutseller's refusal to accept him as his disciple, Hari leaves him. Yet the inspiration he gets from him leads him to knock at the door of the de Silvas for a job. But their absence puts him in jeopardy. However, at last Hira Lal, the watchman of Seabird, rescues him from the nowhere-to-go situation. He takes him to Jagu, the owner of Srikrishna Eating House where he gets food, shelter and work.

During his stay in Bombay, Hari passes through a lot of hardships during which the exhortative discourses of Mr Panwalla, a watchmender, always lead him to take the right

course of his life. At night, Hari shifts himself from the suffocating atmosphere of Jagu's restaurant to the park on Panwallas' advice. In the park through his relations with different sorts of people he develops a sort of positive attitude towards human beings. Panwalla encourages Hari to learn to put his hands to good use. He says to Hari : 'I'll take you on as an apprentice – in the afternoon' (128). He wants Hari to become a genuine watchmender. He keeps his words by enabling Hari to be equipped with the skill of handling every instrument to work upon intricate, complicated machinery.

Again, through his relationships with Jagu and his wife, Hari acquires a knowledge about man-woman relationship in a different situation at Zapadpatti. Out of sympathy towards the sick Hari, Jagu takes Hari to his home at Zopadpatti where Hari observes Jagu's wife shouting at Jagu for bringing one more member to be fed :

> Hardly enough for us and you bring one more to be fed ... You think I'll give your new friend my children's share? (116).

What is clear to Hari is that Jagu's wife is more powerful than Jagu at home. The more Jagu tries to intimidate her the more she screams by saying :

> Go, go, as if I can stop you. That's all you want – to go to your toddy shop ... What do I care if you go and poison yourself ?... (117).

Hari observes that the power of her discourse forces Jagu to leave the house. He also comes to realise the misery of the heterosexual married woman in a situation where her husband expends money on toddy instead of taking least care of his children and wife :

> Man can go to the toddy shop and drink and forget, but we can do nothing, so we must lie down and sleep (Ibid).

This wail of Jagu's wife reminds him of the sorrow he has already suffered because of his father's habit of drinking toddy every night. As a result, they exchange their sorrow between them and become friendly.

The news on the Radio that three fishing boats are reported to be lost at sea, that many fishermen are feared dead makes Hari terribly perturbed and homesick. For guidance he again meets Mr Panwalla at his residence. He advises him to catch his ferry home, after coconut day, but admonishes Hari that he should never have left his mother and sisters. However, Hari defends himself by saying that he had to come to Bombay because of his father who sold out their fishing boat and cow too. 'He had no work – just a small plot of land to grow vegetables in, too small. And now a good factory is going to come up in Thul and they will take away their land and it is said there will be no fishing or farming left to do' (128).

However, coming to know the reason for Hari's leaving his home, Panwalla advises Hari as follows :

> You can find work anywhere ... as long as you can use your hands, you can find work for them. And you have to be willing to learn – and to change – and to grow. If they take away your land you will have to learn to work in their factory instead. If you can't stop it, you must learn to use it ... don't be afraid. ... Things change all the time, boy ... nothing remains the same. You are young. You can change and learn and grow. All people can't, but you can (1281-29).

From Hari's behavioural change, we can guess that Panwalla's exhortative discourse has made sway upon him. He spends more time in Panwalla's shop than in Srikrishna Eating House. He is no longer a frightened, confused boy who crawled into any hole where he could find shelter and protection. He can now make choices and decisions, and does not really wish to live in a rich man's house as a servant. On the coconut day, he displays his physical power as he adventurously pushes aside two boys and shouts :

> It's mine ! It's mine ! (133)

Hari's masculinity gets recognition from Panwalla :

> I never thought I would see you do such a thing ... you can manage now, you will manage all right ... I can see I don't have to worry about you any more (Ibid).

Hari returns home with confidence, hope and watch-mending skill. At home he plans to set up a poultry farm and start a watch-repairing shop in his village instead of waiting for a job in the factory likely to be set up in the village. The plans bring out that Hari now wants to lead an independent life through his own business instead of depending upon the owner of the factory.

But what does Lila want to do? Before we answer the question, let us see how Lila has developed herself in absence of Hari. We find that with the departure of Hari to Bombay, Lila gets a discursive space to construct a discourse of femininity through her relations with different persons in Thul. She is not ambitious as Hari is. But her instinct for survival makes her active and dynamic and adaptable. She saves the family from disintegration by willingly doing chores of the house of the de Silvas and Sayyid Ali. Like Hira-bai, she heads the family, but unlike Hirabai she does not sip toddy and believe in superstitions. However, owing to non-availability of doctor in the village, she has to depend on the quack treatment available for her mother, though she never conceals her doubt about it in any way

> What shall we do? We can't do anything – we have to listen to him. There's no hospital in the village we could take her to, and no doctor who would come. We have no one but the magic man to help us (53).

This implies that she is in favour of modern medical treatment for her sick mother.

However, with the departure of Hari and the coming of the de Silvas in Thul, Lila assumes the role of a breadwinner. Not only this, she becomes the foster mother to her younger sisters and caretaker even of her good-for-nothing father, making sure he has food and cigarette money while tending to their mother.

Lila, unlike the city women, may not join in the procession in the city to raise protest against Govt.'s repressive economic measure, yet she is not without managerial capacity. With the departure of the de Silva, with the arrival of Sayyid Ali and with the admission of her mother to the Alibag hospital, Lila displays her managerial capacity. Unlike Jagu's

wife, she never protests against her father's alcoholism. But by her role of a breadwinner she perhaps puts her father into shame and thereby starts a transformation in him. Even she is able to defy the patriarchal power of her father silently without consulting him while she takes her mother to Alibagh hospital with the help of de Silva.

Anyway, Lila develops and enjoys such power staying at Thul, whereas Hari has to go to the city to masculinize himself. Lila may not have a vision of the future as Hari does, but she is no less equipped to tackle the problem of the present. Perhaps she thinks that one does not require a vision to tackle the problem of the present. Lastly, what is more important to note is the religious performance of their mother in the sea after the races on the beach are over. Standing on the dunes, Hari sees their mother along with other village women scatter flower petals and coloured powder on the rocks as tokens of prayer. The incident makes Hari elated in such a way that he also wants Lila to share the joy with him, so he says :

> Lila, Look ! ... Look, Lila ... (157).

But Lila does not respond to his call, she remains silent. With this silence the narrative ceases to move. But the silence has implications. Perhaps it suggests that Lila does not find anything encouraging in the religious performance of the village women even though a sort of autonomy they enjoy in this domain. This is because in playing different roles in the domain of the family and outside she has gained in knowledge that it is not spirituality but money that makes everything possible :

> The money made everything possible and Lila hoped the gentleman would stay on and on so that she could continue to earn money (111).

The discoure makes it clear why Lila silently declines to be identified with the spiritual performatory role. The discourse also makes it clear that she wants to be an independent earner and enjoy the pleasure of earning. Thus Lila's discourse of femininity without being affected by any other discourse, affects the discourse of nationalist resolution of women's question that locates Indian women in the spiritual domain of culture. If Lila's position is

considered to be the position of the novelist, it may then be said that through the construction of the discourse of femininity Anita Desai wants us to understand that the discourse of the nationalist resolution of women's question was androcentric. Through Lila she transmits a message that the change that would come in the way of industrialization in the village areas should be meant not only for men but for women also. Despite this, Anita Desai, in this context, shows that where poverty is concerned, money is more powerful than spirituality. Thus, Anita Desai, like a Marxist, gives privilege to money-power that determines every aspect of our material life.