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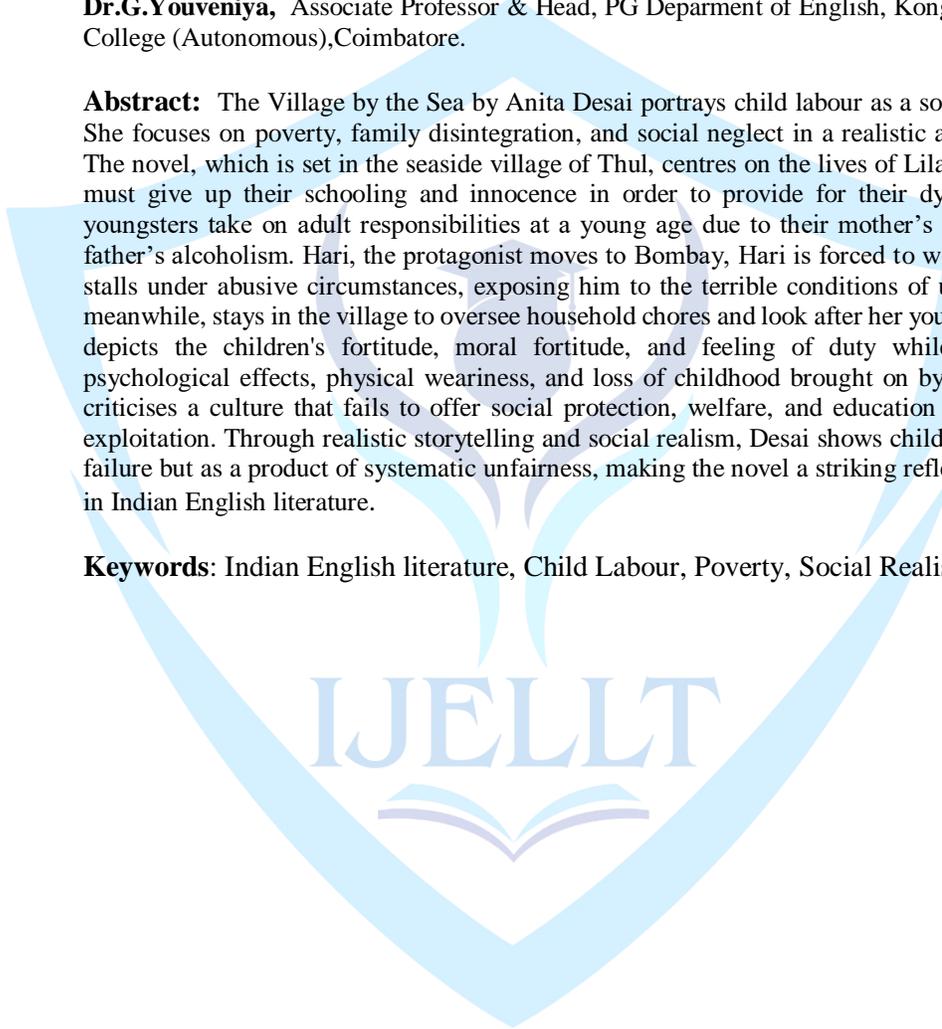
Struggle and Resilience: Child Labour in Anita Desai's The Village by the Sea

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Abstract: The Village by the Sea by Anita Desai portrays child labour as a social and economic issue. She focuses on poverty, family disintegration, and social neglect in a realistic and sympathetic manner. The novel, which is set in the seaside village of Thul, centres on the lives of Lila and Hari, two kids who must give up their schooling and innocence in order to provide for their dysfunctional family. The youngsters take on adult responsibilities at a young age due to their mother's chronic illness and their father's alcoholism. Hari, the protagonist moves to Bombay, Hari is forced to work in factories and food stalls under abusive circumstances, exposing him to the terrible conditions of urban child labour. Lila, meanwhile, stays in the village to oversee household chores and look after her younger sisters. Anita Desai depicts the children's fortitude, moral fortitude, and feeling of duty while also highlighting the psychological effects, physical weariness, and loss of childhood brought on by child labour. The book criticises a culture that fails to offer social protection, welfare, and education while normalising child exploitation. Through realistic storytelling and social realism, Desai shows child labour not as individual failure but as a product of systematic unfairness, making the novel a striking reflection on social injustice in Indian English literature.

Keywords: Indian English literature, Child Labour, Poverty, Social Realism, Exploitation.



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Introduction

One of the most urgent social issues in emerging nations, especially in rural and economically underdeveloped areas, is child labour. Literature has frequently been a potent tool for exposing these social realities and arousing readers' empathy. One of the greatest Indian English novels, Anita Desai, is renowned for her nuanced depictions of oppressed people and their inner conflicts. In *The Town by the Sea* (1982), which takes place in a poor fishing town close to Bombay, Desai addresses child labour, a more general societal concern, going beyond her typical psychological focus.

The protagonists of the book are Hari and his sister Lila, who are compelled to take on adult responsibilities because of their mother's illness and father's alcoholism. They are symbolic of many children who are forced to labour rather than receive care and education since their youth is sacrificed for survival. Through their experiences, Desai portrays child employment as psychological and emotional abuse stemming from social neglect and poverty, rather than just physical labour.

Child Labor's Socioeconomic Context.

The Village by the Sea is portrayed as a place of persistent poverty, little opportunity, and stagnant economic growth. The residents' main sources of income are fishing and small-scale farming, both of which are erratic. Children frequently end up helping the family survive in such a setting. Desai depicts the blurring of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood in a realistic manner.

The family circumstances of Hari and Lila serve as an example of the underlying reasons of child labour. Their mother's protracted illness leaves the family without adequate care, and their father's addiction makes him careless. As a result, Lila handles household chores and looks after her younger sisters, while Hari is forced to drop out of school and look for employment. The book thus shows how structural poverty and helplessness, rather than just parental abuse, are the root causes of child labour.

Forms of Child Labour in the Novel

The Village by the Sea depicts child labour in a variety of overt and covert ways. Hari's labour in the village and then in the city is an example of physical labour done for pay. He travels to Bombay in quest of job, where he encounters uncertainty, gruelling hours, and harsh working conditions. This urban experience demonstrates how networks of child employment in cities are fuelled by poverty in rural areas.

However, Lila's work is still unpaid and restricted to the home. She takes care of her parents and sisters in addition to cooking, cleaning, and fetching water. Her work is equally difficult and emotionally taxing, despite being less obvious. By incorporating emotional and domestic labour, particularly that carried out by girls, Desai thereby expands our notion of child labour.

Children's Psychological Effects

Desai's emphasis on the psychological effects of child employment is among its most remarkable features. As he makes his way to adulthood on his own, Hari encounters dread, anxiety, and early maturity. His constant concern for survival and the well-being of his family replaces his childhood desires, which are suppressed by his feeling of responsibility.

Lila bears an even greater emotional burden. To keep things stable at home, she represses her own desires and aspirations. The internalised agony of many girl children compelled to take up caring responsibilities is reflected in her quiet, fortitude, and patience. Desai subtly depicts these psychological wounds, highlighting the fact that child employment deprives children of innocence and mental stability in addition to education.

Education vs. Work

The narrative depicts education as a far-off and brittle hope. Economic necessity interrupts Hari's education, showing how poverty compels families to put short-term survival ahead of long-term growth. According to Desai, the cycle of poverty and child labour is sustained by a lack of access to education.

But hope is not completely rejected in the book. Hari's exposure to industrial skills in Bombay suggests that education, even outside of the classroom, has the capacity to change people. Desai suggests that if society decides to step in, education, career training, and social support can provide children with an escape from exploitative employment.

The Humanitarian Perspective of the Author

Anita Desai addresses the problem of child labour with empathy as opposed to moral indignation. She depicts the children's hardships with empathy and reality rather than sensationalism. Her story does not romanticise poverty or place sole blame on the parents. Rather, she draws attention to the social and economic systems that ensnare families and kids in cycles of poverty.

Readers are encouraged by Desai's portrayal to see child labour as a social obligation rather than a personal shortcoming. She advocates for awareness, change, and compassionate action by giving voice to silent victims like Hari and Lila.

Conclusion

A moving and accurate portrayal of child labour stemming from poverty, neglect, and social injustice can be seen in *The Village by the Sea*. Anita Desai reveals the complex aspects of child labour physical, home, and emotional through the stories of Hari and Lila. The book emphasises how forced employment results in the loss of childhood, education, and mental health.

At the same time, Desai's humane vision affirms the resilience of children and the possibility of change through education and social support. The novel remains a significant literary contribution to discussions on child labour, urging readers to recognize and address this enduring social issue with empathy and responsibility.

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