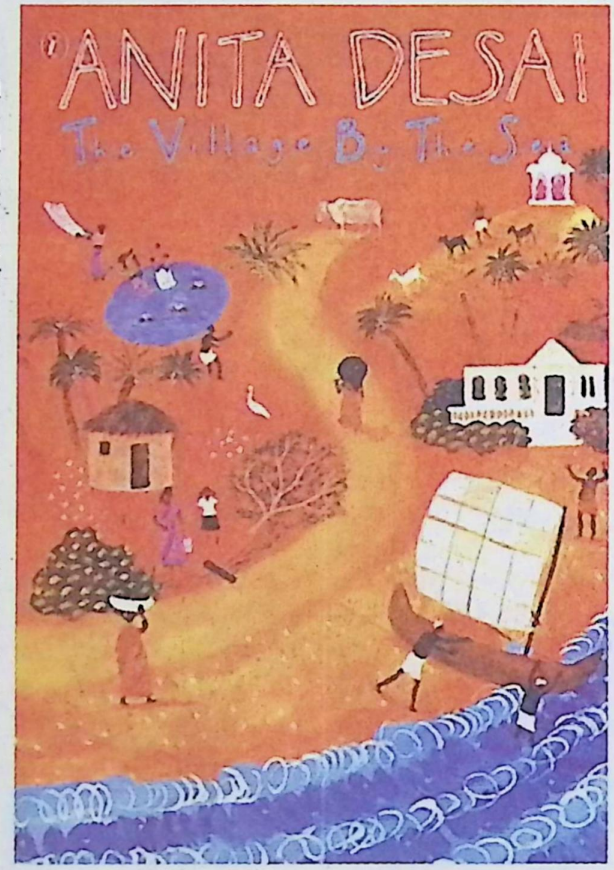
The Village by the Sea
by Anita Desai

Reviewed by Sameeha Suraiya



THIS is a saga of survival at a time when despondency stares back, and when hope still finds room, flickering its warm light through the pages of gloom and uncertainty. Desai shows in her novel the power of human spirit, its ability to take on the reigns when all else fails. Set in a coastal village of Thul, a few miles away from Bombay, the story weaves in characters who never fall short to amuse or stun. A will to survive is all that it takes for them to forget and live under the pressing poverty and the waves of change that may shake all that has been familiar. The dejection in human frailty may come a little too hard at times. The sense of powerlessness rings too loud, maybe. Yet, the characters are the true winners; Desai constructs heroes and heroines who rise from the most ordinary circumstances, fighting against odds, and still smiling.

The Village by the Sea takes us on a journey from a remote village mostly dependent on fishing to the hustle and bustle of Bombay. It tells the story of Hari and Lila who have been forced to grow out of their childhood too soon, now taking care of their ill mother and an alcoholic father, and two younger sisters. The abject situation they live in is not too hard to understand, given it is the same scenario of the third-worlds, yet it still chills the reader to see how two people still barely into their teens deal with the ugly end of reality. What is even more chilling is the very fact that none of it seems exaggerated or fictionalized. This is the real deal. In a country as India, where poverty abounds and personal despair can never be desperate enough, it shows how circumstances can make real men and women out of tender-aged children.

Change is soon underway in the small village, but it seems to be more threatening than welcoming. Rumours spread that the vast paddy fields and coconut groves are soon to be wiped away to make room for roads and a fertilizer factory. Caught in the winds of industrialization, the villagers are apprehensive of their future, wondering if they ever will be skilled for factory work. When a delegation is formed and sent to Bombay to protest against it, Hari decides to join in, hoping for a better livelihood and mostly to escape from the misery. His experiences at Bombay make a pleasing read, mostly for the people of diverse personalities he meets and befriends. Kindness from strangers is not uncommon. The story becomes a clever outline of tradition as opposed to change, intertwining characters who have to merge and adapt themselves under new challenges and difficult times. Their struggles and triumphs are captured in simple and lyrical prose of the true Desai style.

The novel at times, seems to be following an all too familiar trail, for those of us already familiar with the situations of a developing country anyway. But the various messages that the story touches on more than make up for the almost contrived storytelling. And of course, the characters of Hari and Lila shine through the gloom of despair, giving us some of the more enjoyable moments.

A little of evil and more about the goodness of human nature, the spirit of the story and its protagonists will linger on for quite sometime, of that have no doubt!