



Revelation of Human Bonds in Anita Desai's Novel The Zig Zag Way.

Punam Verma
Asstt. Prof. of English
Vaish College, Bhiwani.

The novel *The Zigzag Way* belongs to the author's mature phase. It was published in 2004. This is her latest novel, and it differs from her earlier novels in that, the novel is set in Mexico. Anita Desai presents the Mexican locale in her supremely luxuriant prose. The novel blends history, mythology, superstition and sense of mystery. The study seeks to examine the realities of immigration, exploitation, subjugation, slavery, colonization, displacement and a search for space and identity. Anita Desai sets her eyes on a new continent, Mexico, away from India. Anita Desai has abandoned India to write a novel about Mexico. Anita Desai, whose novels are typically set in her native India, brilliantly entertain an atmosphere, a scene, a moment in time but not just the superficial dazzle of a crowded market or a conversation in a hotel bedroom. External meaning of. She writes about the edginess, confusion, sensations that lie beneath.

The Zigzag Way is divided into four sections. The first concerns Eric, a young American who follows his girlfriend Em into Mexico. Because she's busy with her research, Eric is left alone most of the time, and ends up leaving Mexico City to travel to the Sierra Madre Oriental, where he hopes to find out more about his family. As he discovered shortly before his trip, his father was actually born in Mexico, and his grandfather was a Cornish miner who immigrated there in the 1910's.

The second section mostly concerns Doria Vera, a woman known as the "Queen of the Sierra." Dona Vera is a renowned expert on the Huichol Indian, and her house, the Hacienda de La Soledad, is a research centre that attracts students and experts from all over the world. However, as we soon find out, not everything about this woman is as it seems.

The third section tells Betty's story. Betty is Eric's grandmother, and as a young woman she immigrates from Cornwall to Mexico to marry Davey and settle in one of the mining communities. As you can imagine, the process of adapting to a new culture and way of living is not exactly easy.



Finally, in the fourth section, set in the Dia de los Muertos, we return to Eric, and the three previous storylines more or less come together in a ghostly finale.

The study attempts to explore the female characters of *The Zigzag Way* and bring out a clear-cut perception of their feminine strength as depicted by the author. Jasbir Jain opines that “Anita Desai’s novels are about the preoccupations of a woman in a male world, and in some measure they can be viewed as novels of domesticity as it is defined in a patriarchal society.”

But the study shows that the present novel *The Zigzag Way* presents women characters who may not be said to accede to the above statement. The female characters presented here are extremely tenacious and strong. Each one is enumerated in the present study. It is a well-known fact that women had in past remained dependent on men. Men were considered the sole bread winners. But in modern days the proportion of women who are getting educated has increased, and therefore, the employment opportunities have also increased. One can also find that women-headed households are on the rise, where women meet most financial needs of the household.

Emily Hatter, called Em in the novel illustrated the amount of wide-spread change that now characterize women’s lives. Such changes have created a deep need in women for self-recognition. An affluent environment also has ushered in great freedom. Em knows that she is an independent self. Em is presented as a strong woman and she is in control of her life. She is academically minded and she always moves with a preoccupied air about her. The soberness in her sets her apart from the other girls whom Eric has encountered. Em is a sincere girl and she has varied interests. Em possesses an aptitude of devoting her undivided attention to the subject on hand. This is her strong point and it helps Eric to brace up his own vacillating and indeterminate nature. She is an apt support for the different Eric. Em exudes a warm, sweet, self-confident and poised personality. Em is a strong-willed, and determined personality, quite unlike the female protagonists of Anita Desai’s initial novels.

Em embarks on a study tour to Mexico. She has exhausted the resources for her research at Boston. Therefore, she wishes to carry her research study into the field. Eric finds himself accompanying her. The author depicts Eric as a person who does not possess an independent



identity. He depends on Em for support. The novel reveals that Eric feels like this “usually it was steadying to think of Em....”

There is more than one instance in the text to reveal that Em was the superior of the two. When Eric is assailed by confusion, he feels: “If Em were here, he thought, she would have understood and grasped the whole situation in no time.”

Now Em undertakes a journey to Merida, all by herself, in fulfillment of her research studies. She receives great certainty and confidence from her work. Therefore, she strikes the reader as a wise girl with a deep sense of forethought.

Human experience amply evidences to the fact that when people devote themselves to any worthwhile tasks, it lends a worthiness and meaning to life. The devotion to a reputable mission imparts a sense of service. Dona Vera devotes herself to the education and upliftment of the Huichol Indians, a diminishing tribe. She emerges as a powerfigure. In spite of her foreign identity. Dona succeeds in accumulating power.

Dona Vera undertakes the journey to Mexico through her marriage to Don Roderigo. The novel reveals that she has almost outgrown her prospects at cabaret dancing and such other professions. Dona Vera is an opportunist. She comes forth as a domineering and gritty woman. Although she is a victim of dislocation, wherever she goes, she identifies herself with the culture of the land and empowers herself.

As the plot develops we see several facets of her life. Eric’s efforts to make sense of both Mexico and his family past are counter-pointed with Vera’s story. As Eric furthers his explorations in Mexico, he comes to find out more about the legend of Dona Vera and her escape to Mexico from Nazi Austria with a foreigner. A poor girl in 1930s Vienna, she achieved minor success on the stage, then married Roderigo. He was “large, foolish and fumbling”, but helped her escape from the Austrian capital, where her father had been beaten up by anti-Nazis. In Mexico, Vera is obsessed with the aloof Huichol warriors and is building her life around them – or around an idealized vision of noble savages. Does she help or exploit them? Although she embodies the exploitation of the people and land of Mexico, she pays lip service to their conservation, giving lectures at the Centre for Anthropological and Ethnographic Studies.



The novel reveals that she is an Austrian exile, a refugee from the II World War. Dona has been exploited as a dancer. This exploitation denotes the realistic aspect of the social malaise of the exploitation of helpless women. But in Mexico she has transformed herself into Queen of Sierra. She has forged a relationship with the Huichol Indian and has exerted herself to protect their culture. She has conscientiously worked hard towards their upliftment. She creates a base for the marketing of their hand-made objects, embroidery and artefacts. Her endemic adaptability to mingle with the tribal Huichol Indian, transforms her into an awe-inspiring personality. Vera possesses a distinct sensitivity towards the needs of the Huichols. The novel reveals that she is not an educated woman. But her mind is singularly receptive to the work regarding tribals that is being accomplished throughout the world.

The novel realistically presents the details of Vera's everyday life, her drudgery in order to work for upliftment of the Huichols. Although the world has moved ahead and has experienced transformation, yet there exist people who remain in blind beliefs and superstitions. Such are the Huichols. Vera redeems the Huichols who have been marginalized by the mining company. But the people around there, treat Vera as a controversial woman.

The novel records the subliminal development of Vera from an ordinary dancer to a woman of great popularity. Vera has given the Huichols the service of a redeemer. In this act, she has gratified her own need for self-esteem. This is due to the fact that she is a migrant in Mexico. Her Hacienda is a centre for studies on the Huichols helps to raise her on a very high pedestal.

But Dona Vera suffers an amount of alienation and detachment from the community. She is uprooted from her own motherland. She has led a wayward life and she is uprooted from moral values as well. Now loneliness assails her. She cultivates eccentricities and thus she lives separately in the hacienda. She can identify herself with the Huichols as they are uprooted individuals like her. Her nightmare reveals that there is a deep void in her heart. She has developed detachment from society as she has not received adequate affection and emotional reinforcement from the individuals she expected. Thus she has developed the peculiarity of hating anybody who comes to her hacienda without the august purpose of studying her Huichol. This unhealthy alienation from



society leaves Dona Vera sapped of her emotional vitality. She remains an oddity with her own bunch of rules and regulations governing her territory.

However, the stereotypical role of the weak or dependent woman is totally absent in the present novel. Here, the woman is the repository of all positive values. Another such woman is Eric's mother. She is bred in the fishing village of Maine and is the sole daughter in a family of sons. The novel reveals that, "... she made it evident that while she cooked, cleaned and washed up for the others, she had a mind of her own, separate and intact." Her assertiveness and self-confidence can be witnessed in her insistence on Eric's education." She chooses to send Eric away to school. Eric, the Harvard scholar is recognized as an oddity in a lineage of vigorous Maine fishermen. Eric's mother uproots him from such a milieu and plants him in a boarding school for education. She exudes great pluck when she chooses to be different in two instances. She had insisted on marrying the English stranger who had arrived in their village; and when she sent Eric way to school, "The small, progressive school..." Eric's mother indicates an extraordinary perseverance and strength, a superb intelligence and vigilance, when she questions Em about all her academic pursuits. This behaviour depicts an unusual cognizance of the world outside her domestic periphery.

Betty Jennings is another lady of grit and determination. She struggles against all odds and yet does not give up. Through her mundane existence, Betty expands and grows in resilience. She is in search of her individuality which is reflected in her love for freedom.

Betty is an educated girl; she has attended the Chapel school in Delabole, Cornwall. She is a dutiful and illustrious girl. She is imbued with a fertile sense of imagination and sensibility. Her letters written back home to her sisters and father are evidence to the fact that she is fastidious. She spurns David's attempt at curbing her freedom. The novel reveals a vestige of male domination in David's irritation at Betty's independent ways. Betty expresses her desire to be of some help to the poor classes. She communicates her philanthropic tendency in her awareness of the potter's struggle for livelihood. Betty experiences no uneasiness when she buys his cheap earthen ware. David's snobbish response does not deter her.



The uniform acquisition of identity and individuality through various means as pointed above surpasses any discriminations. These female characters possess a self-appraisal of their status as individuals. These characters are not neurotic, but they are in conscious control of their lives. The Zigzag Way presents emancipated female characters. The patriarchal forces or any other force cannot persecute them. They defy such forces. These women would like to redefine their identities and they struggle when challenged. The male characters are not evil. But their indirect attempts at curbing the women render them powerless. This oblique oppression is manifested in their incapacity to comprehend their women's search for identity. The idealistic tendencies of these women pose a challenge to their men. The author employs the male characters- Eric, Don Roderigo and David to ignite the women's urge to move beyond themselves. In Em's it is her academic pursuit, with Dona Vera, it is her service to the Huichol and with Betty, it is her drive towards the oppressed class. The picture portrayed is not of weakness or neuroticism, but that of tenacity and a power to nourish other around them.

It is Betty's story that produces the book's real momentum. Like both Dona Vera and her grandson many decades later, she is entranced by the spirit of Mexico. Betty's story of adjustment to her new life in this strange land is so full of innocence, wonder, discovery and eventually drama and sadness that it could have been a much longer novel.

The study of the novel reveals the capabilities of the woman towards suffering and adaptability. It also examines the woman's power to transmute her surrounding in such a way that it serves as a site for enhancing herself and her confidence. The fact emerges from the study that women contain more prodigality and depth than men. Patriarchy which symbolizes male authority in the family and society, at times, tends to become ineffective. In *The Zigzag Way*, the members who represent patriarchy become puppets at the mercy of the women. This is seen both in Eric and some extent in Don Roderigo. Male chauvinism seems to be utterly destroyed. Thus the researcher has presented the realistic study of the women characters in the novel.

Another aspect of realism studied in *The Zigzag Way* is phenomenon of the Huichol Indian. Mexico had been economically exploited by the Spanish. The following lines from Carl



Sartorius' book, Mexico and Mexicans, 1959, have been quoted by the author: "When at the beginning of the sixteenth century the Spaniard landed in Mexico, they first met with the native of Sempollan, not far from the sea... the chiefs wore silver and gold ornaments that attracted the rapacious glances of the white adventures. Their first question was 'Whence comes this?' The natives pointed to the west. When, soon after, the ambassadors of Montezuma brought rich presents of the precious metals adorned with emeralds, in order to induce the unbidden guests to turn back, they were confirmed in their opinion that there were literally golden mountains in the interior, and the cry was 'Forwards' !"

These lines reveal that the ancient and immaculate glory that had flourished on mining, was seized by the Spanish encounter. The Mexicans had tried to understand these alien invaders. They strove to satisfy them with precious gifts, but the invaders were bent upon establishing their foothold. Thus the Spanish hegemony had imposed the Spanish language upon the land. With the war of independence, the struggle against this foreign domination had come to an end.

The Spanish invaders dislodged these native dwellers and cast them out of their land. Therefore, the Huichols may be viewed as a marginalized group. The mining industry had exploited and destroyed the land by continuous mining, thereby they had destroyed everything that the natives had cherished as divine. They are the primitive population of that place. They, as a tribe have been silenced and kept ignorant by the domineering Spanish, that is represented by the mining industry. Throughout the history of the world, there have been many instances of enslavement and torture of different using them as labourers or as beasts of burden. This kind of exploitation of the Huichols is very touching. The destruction of these people and their culture has been literally disregarded. It is natural that other forms of destruction claim attention. The fate of these Mexican aboriginals is miserable. They have experienced exploitation and injustice from the mining industries. The Huichols had cultivated occult practices and superstitions. As elsewhere, they were in a state of physical and psychological vulnerability.

Oppressive conditions have left devastating effects on their personality. They experience fear and insecurity at meeting strangers. This is witnessed in their movements. This is due to the



domineering oppression to which they are subjected since a long time. This insecurity and fear has become second nature to them. The Huichols who are present at the hacienda are shy and withdrawn. They speak their own native language. Their depiction is very realistic. They do not even speak broken English. The oppression has also caused in them a suspended sense of individuality. They are unable to think or reason anything. They are pathetically disintegrated. They are innocent and harmless. There was a state of powerlessness and helplessness. They are torn from their home and culture. Their religious beliefs and practices are also snatched away from them. As Dona Vera accuses, the miners sought to dehumanize and enslave these people. They also erased their traditions and culture. Therefore, these people experience a sense of rejection, low self-esteem and inferiority complex.

At the same time, this diminishing tribe has not relinquished its culture and traditions. They led a community life, as it gave them a sense of security. Harmony and cohesiveness was maintained. Brotherhood and social affinity was practiced, as they left a deep need to hold on together. The Huichol Indians felt it essential to understand the universe that was around them. Their existence was closely linked to the elements of nature. Perhaps their survival depended upon it. The peyote cactus held great significance for them. Therefore, they trudged miles together in search of this magic mushroom. Their religion was related to the peyote cactus and it constituted an important aspect of life for them. Their life was permeated with such religious rites and customs. The Huichol also upheld a strong conviction in spiritual upliftment. It is true that only spiritual upliftment can to some extent minimize the damage done to their culture. Thus, the Huichols are seen as a group who cling to their religious traditions. They asserted their faith by traveling long distances on foot in search of the peyote cactus. The author portrays the festival of the dead, which happened to be a ritual associated with the past. The festival presents a realistic presentation of the essence of Mexican life.

The Zigzag Way denotes a total departure from the passive role of women with a limited space and influence on the outer world, to a very positive role. So, with the presentation of female characters in such a positive way, the reality of the modern society can be evidenced. The present



study finds that the depiction is very much in accordance with the present reality. The present-day reality reveals that women are dynamic. They are conspicuous and invincible. They have emerged out of their domestic realm. The study reveals that the reality of woman as the fountain of strength and resilience is firmly rooted and established. Thus, the study finds that The Zigzag Way spurns the stereotyped depiction of the woman as docile and dependent.

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