

## BOOK REVIEW

*The ZigZag Way* by Anita Desai. London: Chatto & Windus, 2004. pp. 182.

This novel deals with the theme of displacement of the individuals by employing magical realist techniques and a rich variety of imagery. The novel, unfolding Mexico, with its pallets of colours, folklore and history along with the lives of the Cornish immigrants and the natives in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, leads Eric's lurching journey to follow the trail of his and his ancestor's history. The title, *The Zigzag Way* which refers to the way Indian miners used to climb the tunnel, symbolizes Eric's efforts to enter the past, as if it was mine-dark and exhausting.

The story begins with Eric's arrival and ends at the festival of the Day of the Dead. Eric; an American graduate; a misfit; always uncertain and having lost his interest in his thesis, follows his girlfriend to Mexico. Here, per chance he attends Dona Vera's lecture and is reminded of his grandfather, a miner. Being always interested in details Eric sets out to explore more about his ancestors – to trace the roots of his identity. The mysterious character of Vera is introduced here. Living as "Queen of Sierra" and bent on portraying herself as a legendary character, she is a self appointed patron of Huichol Indians, possessing an extremely suspicious past. She serves the purpose of illuminating the culture and images of old Mexico and Huichol Indians in detail. Presented as a very colourful character she is always extravagantly dressed and strong enough to be imprinted on the minds of the readers. Compared to Eric, who is struggling to "retrace an old passage and follow to it", Vera has "evidently sloughed off the past."

Eric's journey finally brings him to ghost town, just before the Day of the Dead. The zigzag path takes us to the past again where the third female character of the novel Betty is introduced. It is to her graveside that the novel comes to an end, leaving Eric confronted both by past and present at the same time. The zigzag path of the three displaced character converge on the day of the dead.

Both individual and collective displacements have become an impertinent issue in the modern global inter-cultural world. The novel explicitly deals with the issue of displacement through characters like Vera, Eric, Davey, Betty and Paul. The literal and inner displacement of these characters has left them with no center to return to.

The narrative of the novel follows the technique of “magical realism”, particularly during the festival of the Day of the Dead. Though Desai very seldom steers away from reality but unlike her other works, the last chapter here is steeped in magic, mystery, myth and darkness. The established rules of science are exploited and the living and the dead move together to reject the concepts of time and space. Past and present seem to be crossing boundaries, time and again, comfortably. She succeeds in combining living and the dead, past and the present, reality and myth with equal grace and justice in the novel.

Desai’s skills in narration have even brought the dead to life. The atmosphere of the festival not only captures the minds of the readers with its vivid details but also investigates the effects of the character’s settling in unknown and strange lands. The feeling of lack of a homeland makes us experience the journeys into these unknown lands.

Desai has aptly used various images very skillfully. Moreover these images accentuate the mythical and the mysterious tone both of the characters and the narrative. The enigmatic character of Vera is portrayed through animal imagery to bring out her eccentricity. She is a person who is “gratified as a cat”, has a nose “of a bird of prey”, “dresses like a quetzal”, and lives among pet dogs, horses, pigs and turkeys. Shades of light and darkness along with rich variety of colours are used to create an atmosphere to make the description purely scenic and to paint the image of Mexico that of a “fairy tale”. The last chapter in the cemetery is set at night but at the same time brightened in the light of hundred of candles, giving a vivid and more succinct touch to the ending, speaks of craftsmanship of Desai.

Extracts, in the novel, serve as a significant device and are placed at the beginning of each chapter. Being explicit and self suggesting, they lay the ground even before one probes through the narrative. The novel begins with

the extract; "Time is a ladder one descends into the past" sets the tone of the novel till end.

However it appears that the characters are not worked out in much detail and the reader, at occasions, feels the need to know more about them in order to have a better grasp of the events happening. The way Desai has represented Mexico and Mexican life remains questionable. She had never been known as an authority over Mexican culture and history and the picture of the Mexico drawn by her can not be claimed as authentic. Moreover her abundant use of Spanish words and phrases in the novel, without any glossary of these words, leave the foreign readers at a loss at the end.

Overall the novel may not be very enlightening or satisfying regarding Eric's quest for his past but still Anita Desai can boast of skillfully presenting sumptuous details about Mexico and Mexican life.

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