

The Zigzag Way (2004):

THE STYLISTIC LABYRINTH

Dr. Chetna

Gupta

Associate

Professor

(English)

SPMR College

of Commerce,

Jammu

The Zigzag Way, (2004) reflects a significant departure from Desai's earlier works, the title itself symbolizing the typical postmodernist typology of linguistic innovation and renovation, a purely innovative

expression directly related to the very narrative matrix of the novel. Desai coins the title *The Zigzag Way*, as Desai revelation about “A sense of pleasure in form”¹, as a “characteristic of fabulation”². Consequently, the lives, actions, choices and preferences of the cheap personages in the novel bear close proximity to this innovative title, especially the manner in which the mind-sets of the chief protagonist operate. *The Zigzag Way*, as the title, becomes a diagnostic linguistic paradigm reflecting the crux of the novel’s narrative, characterization and overall theme. Unlike the earlier novels of Desai, the feminist stance in this work does not concentrate upon one single female protagonist, but gets sequestered among these female characters appearing in three different parts of the novel. As an innovative departure from the preceding works of the author, the epicentric protagonistic situation instead devolves upon Eric Jennings, a Mexican and a miner by profession who had settled in England. It is Eric, who also functions as a narrator in all the four parts of the novel and functions as a cohesive and cohering entity because of one obsessive concern which he entertains in his mind, which is to unravel the previous history of his family ancestors who lived and died in Mexico. Eric’s narrative also becomes dyschronic as he in flash back reveals to the reader his association during his student days with Emily also known as Em, who

eventually disappears from the scene and ostensibly, deserts Eric in favour of some other guy. This retrospective rewinding of the narrative on part of Eric takes place in the second part.

Interestingly enough, Anita Desai diffuses the feminine identity of the novel in the form of four different female personages, all of whom are somehow related to Eric. Out of these women characters, it is Eric's dead grandmother, Betty Jennings who dominates the narrative a'la' hamlet's father's ghost in Shakespeare's famous tragedy *Hamlet*.³ Thus, Betty Jennings in absentia, functions as a directing and motivating character whose awe- inspiring aura functions as a big looming shadow over the minds of the central characters who fully participate in the novel's narrative action. Eric regularly visits the grave of his dead grandmother, Betty, whose spirit comes out and in a dream sequence tells her grandson about the family part of the Jennings, especially Eric's grandfather and his own father and mother.

The narrative in *The Zigzag Way*, gets divided into four parts. Each part having Eric as the fulcrum, the nucleus around whom, all the essential details of the situation is narrated. Eric Jennings is a typical post-modernist hero who connects his curiosity with a tendency in postmodernism "with a pervasive nostalgia."⁴ It is the nostalgia which

produces “the desire to fragment, the impossible yearning for the lost object of desire....”⁵ Because of these very issues, Eric in a typical esoteric fashion learns from his dead grandmother buried in Mexico city about his (Eric’s) own parents and some other important events connected with his family past.

Coming back to the Eric-Emily family combination in the second part of the narrative, whatever Eric reveals about Emily conveys to the reader the fact that this lady as a dedoxified post-modernist female keeps her gendered loyalties in transition. Infact, in all the four parts of the novel the female identity remains in a perpetual flux and the pattern of fictional experience regarding the woman characters undergoes a constant change with juxtaposition, contradiction and irony of the governing norms. All the female personages with Eric’s dead grandmother, Betty Jennings, functioning as the bulwark radically reorient “the concept of woman’s identity”⁶ functioning “in terms both of affirmation and negation, even within feminism itself.”⁷ Infact, the entire narrative in *The Zigzag Way*, depicts all the main personages as subservient to “the new ethos of mass society,”⁸ with “the concept of manners and the idea of romance,”⁹ as related entities to post-modernist deculture. *The Zigzag*

Way, are portrayed as remarkable women characters who “act and develop while they react and respond to the changing times.”¹⁰

As already pointed out, the feminine self is given a tripartite essence in *The Zigzag Way*. From the annals of Eric’s family past comes Betty Jennings, his grandmother and it is her figure which dominates the entire sequence of the presentation of the eerie, Desai brings Betty Jennings out of the realms of the past and makes her dominate the fictional scene in the novel. Betty Jennings also serves as an anchor-person in the fictional present of the novel having all along a close rapport with her grandson, Eric. Unlike the earlier novels, *The Zigzag Way*, does not portray the patriarchal domination of woman vis-à-vis the Indian society and culture, but as complete turn-around. It is the western socio-cultural ambience bifurcated into the English and the Mexican scenarios. Consequently, the female identity in *The Zigzag Way*, whether in the form of Betty Jennings or Emily in the second part followed by Madeline in the third part. All these three strands get empowered by revealing enlightening modernity. No longer, do we witness meek, helpless, *ironic* females helplessly trapped in the web of marital disharmony and male domination. Contrary to this, Desai portrays woman as innovative, experimenting females, virtual Metafictional Female Adams paying back

their male counterparts in their own coin. Betty Jennings, herself becomes an adamic figure dominating Eric's sensibility as well as the female world in the novel. What Eric learns from Betty, again confirms the fact that the pattern of fiction in *The Zigzag Way*, becomes dyschronic not conforming to the conventional presentation of novelistic requirements like plot, characterization, imagery and theme. On the other hand, Desai infuses within all the three parts of the novel a role-playing matrix which conforms to "Intention and fulfillment dream and fact,"¹¹ cumulatively presenting the reader characters, situations and relationships which connote "disorder, gratuitous actions, demonic intrusions, obsessive motives,"¹². These words aptly apply to the novel in context of plot-setting as well as character presentation. Mexico city forms the fictional locale of the novel where Eric Jennings lives amidst more than a million people of Latin –American descent in the form of a Republic ruled by Spain for three centuries from 1521 to 1822. Desai makes a significant departure from the narrative settings of her earlier works and invests the present novel with an international canvas of a familiar Indian milieu. As already pointed out the very title, *The Zigzag Way*, defines itself as a problematic metaphor denoting the intricate labyrinthine paths treaded by Indian miners in order to enter the pits from outside. Beside this, the

nomenclature of the title also applies to Eric's fixation to discover his family past for which he undertakes a picaresque style ordeal in the form of a journey from England to Mexico. The journey eventually takes him to Doña Vera, a grande dame surrounded by acolytes and snappy pug dogs:

“...Doña Vera is connected — through marriage — to a prominent family whose share in the mining industry is well known but it the first time, as far as we know, that she has spoken of it in public.”¹³

Eric reads about the tale of miners in the library of Doña Vera and how these workers went down the intricate tunnels and pathways as well as the zigzag allays within the wounds of their mind. This mere act of learning from the library books enforces a kind of mystical trance within the psyche of Eric and he gets transported into the realms of fantasy, a narrative ploy to bring Eric pretty close to his dead grandmother, Betty Jennings. This spirit of the fantastic and the bizarre strengthens Eric's resolve to know about his family past with a kind of metaphysical euphoria. Eric goes on to expand his curiosity regarding the supernatural rendezvous with his dead grandmother by trying to convey the same as a common place factor. Yet, “a narrative is a fantasy if it presents the persuasive establishment

and development of impossibility, an arbitrary construct of a mind with all under the control of logic and rhetoric.”¹⁴

The eerie, bizarre and the fantastic embellished with intrusions of pure fantasy support the narrative in *The Zigzag Way*, thereby furnishing to the reader the figure of Betty Jennings, who not only dominates the final scene in the novel but while narrating to her grandson, Eric, certain revelatory facts about his parents, also positions herself in the weightlessness of metaphysics as she reveals to Eric whatever he wanted to know about his family. Human consciousness and the human mind, one, in the real, living form of Eric Jennings and the other one, mantled in the garb of supernatural beyond birth or death, as “the great body of Radiance,”¹⁵ and “hath no birth nor death, and is the immutable Light.”¹⁶ Betty Jennings materializes from the life - hereafter to successfully climaxes Eric’s odyssey of inquisitiveness vis-a-vis the Jennings family - past. Betty Jennings, informative revelations conveyed to Eric reflects a tapestry of zigzag ways, chequered lives, mystical labyrinths, problematic tunnels and dungeons. Thus, Betty’s informative images conveyed to Eric represent the demonic mineral world of apocalyptic symbolism simply to convey to the reader that Eric receives ingredients within his mind and psyche which can be explained as the very stuff of fantasy. The Eric-Betty

combination of grandson and the grandmother in terms of archetypal criticism explains itself as a cocktail, and admixture of a society, “Held together by a kind of molecular tension of egos,”¹⁷ displayed by Eric’s loyalty to his grandmother Betty, who is the supernatural leader diminishing the individual Eric, or, at best contrasted, “his pleasure with his duty or honor.”¹⁸

The cumulative identities of Eric Jennings and his grandmother, Betty Jennings signify a conception of human life in which fulfillment is both individual as well as social. The fusion of the picaresque and the spiritual world denoted by the Eric-Betty combination signifies what in contemporary apocalyptic symbolism is defined as “The Turning of literal act into play,”¹⁹ besides connoting “the release of fact into imagination.”²⁰ The keynote of the text resolves with the sense of dread:

But now that he was following the trail of his own history, tunneling his way back into his ancestry, and the history of his ancestors, he felt the first time the urgency — and the terror — of knowing. An urgency, and a terror, he could have share at last with Em.” (ZW, 97)

The intrusion of Emily into Eric's mind in a totally unexpected manner simply represents the postmodernist technology of character–juxtaposition with the requisite quantum of attendant irony. Eventually, these situations, characters and events function as a preamble to the exercise of the fantastic and the employment of the fantasy literature.

Eric's journey with the history of silver mining, genealogy of characters, formation of Mexican culture through the centuries of migrations, revolutions, wars, English Cornish migration into Mexico, personal histories, rituals, cultural practices, beliefs, realism and fantasy linking Mexico with Cornwall, New England and Vienna in kaleidoscopic images. Mexico has perennially fascinated anthropologists, writers, poets, travellers, film–makers for its “otherness”. The past history of Mexico is narratively recaptured by loading the narrative fibre. The geographical terrain of the narrative ambience of Mexico employs a fair amount of terrestrial imagistic nuances and motives which convey to the reader, that for Eric, Mexico becomes a land of exploration and discovery including the prime Self of grandmother, Betty Jennings.

Eric's hunger for erudition not only makes him gather the right conceptualizations from the Mexican library but he also approaches other accessible sources of inspiration and knowledge, something

represented by a poetic preamble to the very first chapter of the novel. A few lines quoted from the British poet's poem titled '*Arrival at Santos*' go like this:

*"...Oh, tourist,
is this how this country is going to answer you
and your immodest demands for a different world,
and a better life, and complete comprehension
of both at last, immediately ..."*²¹

Sierra Madre, whose silver mines were abandoned during the Mexican revolution in 1910-1920 has been historically a site of interest to people across Europe. The excavation drew people from different ethnic groups searching for employment and wealth. Eric is to discover his mores buried in mysteries. Its exotic ceremonies against the awesome ruins as well as the natural landscape enchant him:

"Over this great field of volcanic rock from the ruins of the Aztec temples, the tricolour of Mexico whipped like a dragon in the wind from the mountains that⁵ ringed the city and were visible at the end of every avenue and street, benevolent and protective witches wrapped in dark skirts. Eric and Em were just in time to observe the ceremony of taking down the flag for the night by a platoon of toy-sized soldiers as stiff and smart as painted lead."(ZW, 25)

The proceeding words related to Mexican landscape ambience can be explained in terms of what Northrop Frye calls as ‘Thematic Modes’. In this form of fiction writing the narrative tends to flow out from within the psyche of the central protagonist and his own emotional experience. In case of Eric, the situation is also thematic. He too himself embarks upon a metaphysical-journey of discovery and affirmation vis-a-vis his immediate family ancestors. Even the sepulchral visitations of Eric’s grandmother, Betty Jennings to perpetuate her occult trysts with her grandson, again conforms to what has been termed in postmodernist literary performance as exemplifying the “tension between product and process for a dramatic work”²² The product-process analogy in post-modernist literary parlance transcreates the central protagonists politics of location. When Eric, arrives at Mexico in quest of his generic roots he, as already specified, goes on witnessing the Mexican aura and the welding of the human and the pastoral:

“...Mayan and Aztec design and guarded by armed police and police dogs on chains, the sweetmeat shops where the sweets resembled gems, the restaurants where waitresses floated in balloon-like skirts and wing-like caps, the pavements vendors outside proffering lottery tickets, safety pins, or

songbirds in stacked cages, the Zapotec women from the country who spread over their bunches of dried herbs, their shrivelled scorpions and fried grasshoppers on little mats they rolled up and made disappear as soon as the city police road up in white jeeps,...”(ZW, 27)

Many more stunning colours, exotic shapes, sounds and gaudy, garish artifacts of Mexico strike him and so contrasted with Boston:

“...while at the corner outside the cathedral fleshy dancers in costumes of brilliant feathers and anklets of jangling bells danced and whirled the Aztec dances for tourists with cameras, purses and pesos.” (ZW,28)

Into the township of Sierra Madre, however, Eric finds that there were more to the Mexico of colours and romance, “its emptiness and petrification were indescribably Mexican too” (ZW,41). But as they drew close enough in search of Doña Vera:

“But as they drew close enough to make out the first range of bullet-coloured mountains, a crater suddenly opened up in the earth as if meteor had fallen and formed it; a wide, basin-like depression appeared which had not been visible from a distance.” (ZW, 41)

The annual celebration of the day of the dead was approaching. As he walks along the lake, the landscape assumes Eric, forms suggestive of the stairs — of soullessness, joylessness:

“Egrets and herons stood stock-still in the shallows as if they were roots or branches anchored to the clay below. Everything seemed fossilised except for the ripple of light that ran through the seen as it might in a mirage.

On the other side of the lake, against the flank of the mountain, there was a long, low building of stone, on three sides surrounded by adobe wall that blended in so perfectly with the land that it could easily have been overlooked. “(ZW, 42)

Desai’s expertise at juxtaposing within the narrative- matrix, innovative - cum-renovative images of pastoral nuances, reflects the thematic strategy of the author to bring about a symbolic affinity between Eric and his extraordinary rendezvous game with Mexican landscape. The Bewitching game of fascination goes on when Eric attends exotically beautiful lecture of grand dame Doña Vera, on local Indian tribe, though delivered in Spanish the lecture abounds in names and places that sound oddly familiar. He begins to recall stories told by his Cornish grandfather who once worked as miner in Mexico but when he tries to talk to Doña Vera:

“No longer the fantastically attire and theoretical creature she had appeared there, she was merely a small wiry figure in non-descript Khaki who barely stood out in their overwhelming landscape.”
(ZW, 43)

Eric watched her as she talked to a young boy patting the horse's neck and flanks and steadying the animal “in Jodhpurs and boots, her white hair tucked under a hat” (ZW, 44). Eric notes that though she houses local Indians, she never speaks to them, “only of them”. When she gathered that Eric was not interested in anthropology, in the Huichol Indian, rather a personal reason has brought him she becomes unenthusiastic. At the dinner table, he could watch her attired dramatically in Kimono, that conceals “layers of worn and lumpish grey flannel,” unravels a chequered past having fled:

“...not the Nazis, but her family's Nazi past, was difficult to forget not with standing how much she tried sloughing it off to emerge like some shy and secretive scene in its new skin”. (ZW, 65)

Things related to the grand dame Doña Vera are lucidly narrated and magnified to produce an exotic- cum- romantic effect. Doña Vera almost reminds the reader about Rider Haggard's immortal female character She, the central protagonist of the novel bearing the same name. As in *She*, the

feminine identity becomes intensively self-reflexive, a similar kind of translucence sparks in the description about Doña Vera. As already pointed out, Anita Desai's diffusion of the female self in *The Zigzag Way* brings within its ambit the dedoxified aspect of feminine representation. A similar manifestation of feminine authenticity in the mould of postmodernist deculture comes when the narrative brings the reader to the participation of Emily, also known as Em, in the novel's action. It is Eric's retrospective foray down memory lane which beams to the reader another decreative dimension of the female self.

Emily had been Eric's girlfriend during their college days, but Emily in a typical dehumanized passion deserts Eric for greener pastures. The would be writer within Eric prods him to accompany her in this journey with the hope that Mexico will yields the impetus he is lacking, energize him with a new self-confidence and push him out of his comfort zones. The Eric-Emily gender equation eventually gets lopsided as the woman displaying a high modicum of self-reflexive aggression has other plans to execute. The likings, choices and preferences of Eric and Emily are totally discordant and consequently, the scenes and sights that are of no interest to Em, attract Eric. Here the narrative clearly reflects the fractured 'disjointedness of their joint Experiences':

“Eric found himself distracted by everything in the airport – the kiosks displaying textiles bright with rainbow stripes and rainbow flowers, tequila bottles shaped like cacti, sweets made out of cacti and fruit, and the arrivals all which was swamped by more people with blank hair and brown skin than he had ever encountered before, families embracing and weeping and laughing as if they lived their lives on the level of grand opera. Outside, he was faced with light that struck more whitely, electrically than he had ever seen on to a spectrum of colour unknown in Boston, Massachusetts— flat- roofed houses with pink and orange and violet walls, pea- green taxis and leaf- green buses. When they reached the hotel where the tranquilising effect of plashing water in marble fountains was cancelled by the shrieking of birds of bright plumage in tall cages, he had to lie down, he felt the blood racing in his veins too fast. Em did not appear concerned.“ (ZW, 24)

It becomes quite evident that Emily and Eric could not be each other’s cup of tea and their individual identities evolve in diverse directions as do their minds. Probably it is the “Otherness” of Eric’s family that baffles Emily.

Eric comes from the fishermen stock:

“Visits to Eric’s family were always hasty, improvised, scrambled affairs, infrequent and rarely satisfactory. Em, who came from a solid phalanx of doctors, dentists, optometrists and surgeons in

Philadelphia and its environs, so that he own choice of a medical profession seemed not only logical but inevitable, never could find such a link between the Eric she knew and his family which was, effectively, his mother's side of it." (ZW,15)

Emily perceives the visible strengths of Eric's matrilineage:

"...it was his mother who had, in her direct and practical way, dealt with the problem by plucking him out of the turmoil of a high-spirited family bred for the outdoors, and sending him to a boarding school for an education."(ZW,16)

Eric, bored with routine research work, is not an austere academic type, "how he could scarcely bear to look at the thesis he has written on immigration patterns in Boston in the 1960's". In spite of the generous grant, he is not inspired to work. Unlike Em, who is so focused, certain and sure, immersed her work and would not approve Eric's languishing.

The research work- culture of Emily and Eric becomes virtually antithetical: Eric's lackadaisical attitude vis-a-vis his work as opposed to Emily's focused and evolved one, further contributes to the growing gender- wedge between the two:

"Down to the shadow of a disapproving frown on her brow as she observed him sprawling there, idle. It

would creep across her face whenever she came back from a long day at the lab and found him at home, in Boston, listening to Mozart or to Schumann, with the cat Shakespeare ensconced on his lap.” (ZW, 11)

Eric seems to be more interested in enjoying creative music rather than catering to the vicissitudes of his research work. Eric has his private quest --- tracing his family’s history in the ghost town of Sierra. The narrative proceeds to conjure the struggle of Eric’s grandparents and their community. Now in place of Cornish workers, the native Huichol Indians suffer the cruelty of the mines. When Eric inquires into their lives, he provokes the ire of their self-appointed saviour : Doña Vera – the Queen of the Sierra who is resentful of any reference to the past history. She “packages for the purpose of tourist interest the ‘Living culture’:

“It is a liv-ing cult-ure, you see. I have guests in my hacienda that can prove to you its exis-tence. Their way of life ex-ists. That is my purpose, Señor, to keep it a-live. Post - Columbian Mex-ico.”(ZW, 57)

Eric gets to know that she is the Austrian wife of a mining baron whose family usurped the lands of the miners and made them slaves, In spite of her formidable authority, he ventures to tell here about his private quest:

“You see, my grandfather came out to Mexico to work for a mining company. He was Cornish, from a

mining family and, you see, the mines in Cornwall failed. ... because I recognised the name you mentioned in your lecture in Mexico city, the one I attended, I told you I attended. That's when I heard that you run this centre for studies of this area, so I thought I'd come here to see what I could find out. I heard your family too had a connection to the mines —'... 'You are mis-in-formed, Señor. I may be running this centre and it may be fam-i-ly property, but the mines, they were before my time. I did not arrive here till the forties, and I am myself an eth-no-graph-er,' she spaced out her syllables as if for someone of lesser intelligence, 'and trained as an an-thro-polo-gist with some of the great-est teachers in the field. I have worked among the Huichol Indians, the first, the first Eu-ro-pean woman to do so. I founded my centre to pro-tect them, their en-vir-on-ment , their hist-ory, and rel-ig-ion. I am not one of those who took their land and ru-ined it with mining and made them slaves. Whoever tells you this, *lies*." (ZW, 55-56)

When Eric meets Doña Vera in Mexico and she tells him that the mining industry is something common between the two of them as Eric's Mexico forefathers were also miners and Doña Vera's also inherits a mining industry fortune. As a powerful female Character, Doña Vera character creates the awareness in the reader about the fact that "both feminism and postmodernism can be seen to have radically altered the

way in which modern culture is understood and experienced.”²³ Both Emily as well as Doña Vera seems individually focused and powerful women capable of evolving the female identity with a firm sense of authority and awareness. Doña Vera is of the opinion that Eric has been misguided and misinformed about her relationship with the mining workers and her contribution to their welfare. She exploded in vehement protest:

“I am not one of those who took their land and ruined it with mining and made them slaves. The word exploded with a clap of thunder.” (ZW, 56)

Doña Vera possesses a feminine mystique about her, besides her proclivity towards artists, intellectuals and other creative personalities. As a powerful women, Desai makes Doña Vera as she makes Emily “the metaphor of femininity to designate a linguistically non-reproducible “otherness” effectively ...,”²⁴ in order to make language as a feminine metaphor which can connote for the female identity “a space of the sacred”²⁵. In other words, as women personages the language they speak functions as a powerful instrument of self-determination and a nucleus of autonomy with in the female self. The modicum of awareness displayed

by Emily and Doña Vera gets enlightened by the very essence of modernity. Both women not only function as focused personages but also have clear cut focused objective in their minds.

Eric's determination to find out certain important facts about the mining industry makes him dig-out vital information from the archives particularly some historical facts about unscrupulous element besides the immense wealth and opulence emanating from the mining industry.

“Even now , with Roderigo long since dead and buried in the family vault were no one visited him it gave her satisfaction to think how mistaken he had been and how much he must have regretted it when, leaving him to a family , council in San Luis Potosi to which he had insisted she come, she had slipped away, scandalously alone, and visited for herself the Hacienda de la Soledad, the house at he foot of the mountain from which the silver had been extracted that made the family wealthy, wealthy enough to own this hacienda among so many others. The others, however, being occupied his mother, his aunts, his sisters and brothers-in-law, nieces and nephews, uncles and cousins, had been so many extensions of the prison house in ‘the best locality’ in Mexico City to which he had brought her, while the Hacienda de la Soledad was from the very first her own: no one else wanted it.”(ZW, 66)

The historical mansion of Doña Vera's mining industry, ancestors, now lay in ruins, yet reflected a special grandeur of its own, unique historicity possessing an aura of its own:

“A graveyard of history – that was what she found herself surveying when she first saw the Hacienda de la Soledad, a ruin of blackened stones, fallen beams and cavernous halls where her foot steps sounded like hammers tapping on the great stone tiles. All around parched land with the wind roaring like an unimpeded flood through its emptiness.” (ZW, 67-68)

Hacienda de la Soledad invoked terror and fascination; she has delusions of “the panting breath of someone quite distraught”:

“There was a scramble of footsteps on the gravel, the panting breath of someone quite distraught. ‘Señora, Señora, ‘the chauffeur called, ‘come back, instantly, I beg you. ‘When she did, she found him whey – faced and listened to his scolding. ‘There are rattlesnakes there, scorpions as big as your hand. Shafts you could fall through. Please, please, what would the Señor say to me?’” (ZW, 69)

The above quoted words make it clear that Doña Vera's psyche right from the beginning had got wedded to the language of history spoken by every particle of the Mexican mining cosmos and its legitimacy, unconsciously as well as metaphorically. Doña Vera's feminine identity vis-à-vis a Mexican mining industry and its glorious past can be seen as involving radical identification of women as a society where

women themselves become exclusive caretakers of a place and its historical roots including the assets from the past, where as the males get marginalized.

In Doña Vera's library, reading *The Political essay*, makes Eric behold the zigzag paths of the miners:

“They walk in a zigzag direction because they have found from long experience that their respiration is less impeded when they traverse obliquely the current of air which enters the pits from without.... Was this the world is grandfather had found when he crossed the ocean and sought out new territory where he might stake his claim?” (ZW, 79)

Earlier to Eric's accusation of hidden knowledge and important facts about the miners and the mining world as a part of the Mexican landscape ambience, nobody else had any knowledge about or access to such information, with the sole exception of Doña Vera. Ostensibly, Eric's gathered knowledge cannot be to the liking or taste of Doña Vera as she virtually held the status of the Empress of knowledge about the Mexican miners and their industry. The book from which Eric's reads and learn about the Mexican mining glory and its separateness, its subjectivity poses an interesting quantum of challenge to Doña Vera's hegemonistic appropriation of Mexican mining and its historical mysteries. Eric's reading of the book itself become interesting especially the minutest

details about the miners and their work. The narrative reflects all this in these words:

“Frequently they have to ascend a thousand or fifteen hundred feet, not by ladders but by means of the trunks of trees in which steps have been hewn. As tallow candles only are allowed in mines, the workman must shelter his light with one hand, so that the draught may not extinguish it, and have therefore only a slight hold on the other. He thus moves upward with his burthen, the trunk being slightly inclined, and secured by props every fifteen feet, the abyss on either side, into which a false step precipitates him. Indians have been known to carry up from five hundred weight in this manner, in leather sacks.” (ZW, 85)

Eric’s obsessive engagement with his ancestor’s past keeps intersecting with the account of tragic irony in the life of Doña Vera, her memories of the first visit of a child Ramon to Hacienda, with bruises and thereafter her growing fascination with him. A particularly disturbing event from the past disturbs Doña Vera’s peace of mind and it is related to a death of the child Ramon:

“It was the beginning of a legendary friendship, irregular and infrequent but revived over some ten years, again and again – till, abruptly, it ended.

Now, supine, she felt that loss again, the black coyote that hunted her down at night she nearly broke out again into the howl she had uttered on hearing of his death – senseless, pointless, falling from a roof he was repairing in his village - throwing open her arms to catch him when he fell. She had promised to take care of him – why had she not ?” (ZW, 82)

The harrowing reminiscences of Doña Vera’s past come sprawling in the surrealistic narratives invoking the nightmares that afflict her and we are told that “After such a night, morning could only come as a relief ”.(ZW, 84) Desai seems well-versed in comprehending the feminine aspect of the gothic and in her conjuring, Doña Vera become a potent producer of the uncanny-both as a victim and the agent — a woman who figures as a maze. During his forays into the Mexican mining past, Eric at one time comes in contact with an old man who lives near a church called as Saint Francis Cathedral. This old person conveys information about his (old man’s) ancestors, thus enabling Eric to delve deeper into the past thereby acquiring vital inroads into the mysterious world of the mining industry:

“The stone tiles under his feet had been rubbed soft and uneven by centuries of shuffling footsteps, and when Eric paused, he saw the old man had finally arrived on his knees and was making genuflections in all four directions, one after the other,

meticulously, while his daughter, if that was who she was, went up to the altar to light a candle... . In the bright, bleak chapels of the north, guilt and sin were not permitted, but they seemed to have gathered here for refuge and to live on, an unquiet, numinous and murmurous life in the forgiving dark. The past was alive here — crepuscular and underground, but also palpable.

Taking his cue from her, he went up to the alter and lit them from the candles already lit and flaming there, then stuck the first, and after that the second, into a bed of warm, melting wax, saying aloud as he did so, his grandparents' names: 'David Rowse.' 'Betty Jennings.'

After wavering a bit, he flames sprang up, brightly and playfully, each a wheel of bright spokes, blinding him. He stepped backwards, and as he did so, he heard laughter, the laughter of a young girl, ringing out clear and light heartedly in the dark.

He twisted around to see who it could be.”. (ZW, 111-112)

As already mentioned, the awesome figure of Eric's grandmother, Betty Jennings virtually filters across the sections of the novel, thus attaining a spatial eminence in the narrative, besides being invested with a unique grandeur of feminine authority. As the grand parents of Eric, Betty Jennings and her husband Davey seem to have been close lovers, a cohesive couple united by love: “Betty did not say if what she saw awed or frightened or enchanted her but she did, in every line, express her trust

in Davey and her job in being with him (ZW, 119) Davey's day started at the mine. Like many of them he would line in pairs.

“... the way the day started at the mine, for instance: how the men lined up in pairs, had their names entered in a big ledger and took the tools and powder handed them, then followed the overseer to the entrance were they stopped in front of a crucifix that hung their to make sign of the cross. ...On a landing below they had erected an image of the saint they worshiped, the saint of *trabajadors*, workmen, decorated with fresh flowers or branches, and they would light candles to him before going in different directions to start work. When Davey first described the scene to Betty, she was shocked by such popish rites but he assured her that the Cornishmen took no part in them and that, on emerging from the mine at the end of the day, it was there own good Methodist hymns they sang on the way home.” (ZW, 124)

Following this important revelation, the narrative now shifts to talking about the family of Betty Jennings including the smallest details which may interest the reader:

“And, more than fortunately for Betty's child, la Bella Isadora had given birth a short while ago herself, to a still born baby, and on seeing the tiny infant wrapped and mewling in Mrs Moran's Shawl, took it to her own full breast, pressing a brown nipple to its blindly searching mouth.” (ZW, 144)

All the other details which Eric learns about his father Paul and grand parents, Davey and Betty Jennings, make it clear that the women of the Jennings's family enjoyed close bondage and kinship with their spouses, be it Betty Jennings or any other woman it becomes clear Eric to that the gender equation among his immediate family ancestors was a progressive, contribution as well as conducive one. After having, married Madge, a woman who nursed him, Davey brought his son Paul to live with him who was in the care of Betty's sisters.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Davey went to volunteer, but was rejected on account of curvature of the spine. After failing to get recruited in the America army on the onset of the Second World War, Davey's interest now remains to secure a safe passage to the coast of Maine. Sitting by the side of Betty's grave, Eric mind gets illumined regarding the existential crux of his own journey. Eric's declared and desired objective, however, remain to honour his dead family ancestors which includes his grandparents and parents in a typical polycentric-cum- traditional Hindu way. Eric's interaction with his dead grandmother itself form an extraordinary bizarre type adventure; "with a long night" :

“The long night, the increasing chill, the effort of staying awake and alert, all became overwhelming more than he could resist. It would only make sense to leave, return to the inn and the comfort of a warm bed, knowing he had made the effort, and failed...

A young woman was descending it, with such ease and speed it was as though she did not notice the stones in her way, they were not impediments to her. She was preceded by a fragrance that was as fresh as the breeze that was blowing freely, not the heavy perfume of copal, tallow candles and funeral flowers but a much lighter, more natural one, of herbs like lavender, rosemary...”(ZW, 174-175)

Infact, the narrative in *The Zigzag Way*, climaxes with the author resorting to brilliant juxtaposition of the supernatural and pastoral iridescences. Eric’s climactic meeting with his grandmother, Betty Jennings, in the graveyard is encapsulated with “Universal structures of subjectivity “.²⁶ Infact, what follows is simply out of this world as Eric holds an interesting conversation with Betty as a young lady and this spooky visitation of Eric’s grandmother in itself is clothed with a high degree of self- reflexive portraiture of a powerful dead woman’s ghost from her youth.

Betty mistakes Eric’s as Paul, her son and inspite of Eric’s pointing out the mistake she goes on talking about Paul. Interestingly enough, Betty in the garb of her youthful days looks like a flower herself, and Eric by talking to her sees that the young Betty is “holding a small

bunch of grey leaves and pale flowers and to his amazement waved to him” :

“Seeing Eric standing by the low wall that ringed the cemetery, she lifted her hand, holding a small bunch of grey leaves and pale flowers, and to his amazement, waved to him. He could not imagine why she acknowledged him or who she might be or why she was there, but his mind had ceased to pose questions, they were all obliterated by the wave of her hand and the pure scent of the flowers.”
(*ZW*, 175)

What Desai is exactly doing here conforms to the postmodernist literary typology of producing “an effect of ontological problematisation as opposed to the concerns of the latter with epistemological issue”²⁷. As a postmodern text, *The Zigzag Way*, raises question such as “which world is this?”²⁸ and the language Betty speaks to her grandson Eric from a feminist perspective “paradoxically both expresses and oppresses, educates and manipulates”.²⁹ What the reader learns at the end of the narrative in *The Zigzag Way*, is that, language cast in an extra ordinary mould spoken by a dead women who from beyond her grave assumes the bodily mantle of her youth “underline her own ironic claim that she is a

free women who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire; her sex... conditions her freedom “³⁰.

Betty Jennings as a young lady talking to Eric repeatedly mistakes him as Paul, in other words, the son is mistaken for his father by his grand mother:

“She gave him a look out of the corner of her eyes not so much conquettishly as simply amused. ‘And you – you’re Paul, aren’t you? I thought you might come. “ She sat herself down on the wall, ready for his response.

‘No,’ he told her sadly, ‘I’m not. Paul is my father. I’m Eric, his son.’

She gave no indication she had heard or understood. Stroking the silvery grey leaves of the nosegay in her hand, she said almost shyly, ‘You are just as I thought you would be. Dark, like Davey, and all the men in Davey’s family. They say the Cornish aren’t English at all, that they come from somewhere else. Have you heard that ? ‘

‘Yes,’ Eric admitted, but anything he had ever heard or read on the subject went clear out of his mind in her presence. ‘I think, I think they may have come from Spain – or somewhere.’

She was too concerned with accuracy. ‘Every one comes from somewhere else, ‘ se said, nodding towards the shifting, moving shapes and shadows behind the chapel, and added, ‘Like Mexicans. They say they came from Asia, across the — the — ‘.

‘The Bering Straits,’ Eric put in, relieved to remember something, to know that his mind was intact and had not been swallowed up by the eeriness of the night on the dark hill.

The name clearly meant little or nothing to her. She went on picking at the leaves in her hand and at the thread of her thoughts while Eric watched and listened, scarcely breathing. The thread she picked at seemed to waver and wander. ‘Like us, from Cornwall. Such a long way to come.’ Her eyes widened and Eric could see their grey, transparent glaze.” (ZW,176)

It won’t be an exaggeration to say that the central protagonist Eric’s extraordinary journey to Mexico ends with a narrative resorting to the presentation of an old dead lady, Betty Jennings visited the real world as a young, pretty girl dressed in a ghostly apparel as ‘a single, human being pure and simple, unmixed with other human being...’³¹. What Desai exactly does in this closing part of the narrative is to present to the reader “an examination of alternative feminist models of identity...”³². It does not apply only in the case of Betty Jennings but also applies to the portraiture of Doña Vera, all the while remaining “blind to the possibilities of challenging autonomy through a relational concept of identity.”³³

The authenticity of the feminine self in *The Zigzag Way*, is totally invested with the problematics of postmodernist characterization. In the case of Doña Vera, as well as Betty Jennings and to some extent Emily, what we witness, correlates to a kind of interactive narrative construction, with Eric assuming the role of the explorer, the sociologist and the epicentre of the authority. It is Eric, who becomes the coordinating authority between feminine representation and locationale politics linked to social or religious groups. Eric's Mexican meanderings, especially his personal encounters with Doña Vera and of course his dead grandmother, Betty Jennings, in itself metamorphoses into new opinions and fresh knowledge tending to flow unilaterally from the top down: from Doña Vera to Eric followed by the flux emanating from Betting Jennings to Eric. Thus, the feminine form in *The Zigzag Way*, transcreates a shift from traditional to postmodern identity as, the Feminist Self moves from a world of honour, to one of dignity, thereby emancipating the women's feminist identity from socially imposed roles. This very fact applies to the characters of Emily, Doña Vera as well as Betty Jennings. In this pyramid of the feminist self, it is Betty Jennings who remains to the top and act as the magnetic impulse to draw the hero Eric and make him fulfill

his symbolic journey of discovery, self-appraisal as well as self-affirmation.

The family remains as a rock-bed of narrative movement and character development in *The Zigzag Way*, with the feminist identity getting trifurcated in the form of Betty, Doña Vera and Emily. Yet, Anita Desai's brilliance gets reflected in handling the feminist portraiture by using the postmodernist technology of juxtaposition, irony as well as antithesis. Finally, it can be said that in the *The Zigzag Way*, the legitimacy of the feminine self is not only progressive but also some what complicated due to the presence of the narrative of detotalized-totalization, a typical post modernist technique simply applied as an instrument of innovation and renovation, creation and recreation, fully represented by the roles of the characters Eric, Betty Jennings and Doña Vera.

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1. The Ghost of King Hamlet of Denmark arrayed in full royal uniform appears before prince Hamlet outside the same parts of the castle, while some digging is going on. It is in this very crucial opening scene of the great tragedy that the young Hamlet knows from the ghost of his father that the princess mother's Gertrude and his uncle Claudius had murdered King Hamlet and the consequent happenings resolve to murder his mother and uncle and thus take revenge for his father's assassination.
2. Patricia Waugh, ed, *POST MODERNISM A READER* (London New York, Edward Arnold, 1992) 191

3. Patricia Waugh, 192
4. Patricia Waugh, 189
5. Patricia Waugh, 189
6. This expression is used by Ihab Hussan in his famous work *Radicle Innocence. Theories in the American Novel*---? Hussan uses the expression mass society and its ethos to denote the erosion of the human values and traditions at the hands of a destabilizing quicks and society which constantly changes its contours and does not lend itself to any assured definition.
7. Krishna Mitra,” The images of women in the selected novel of Anita Desai”, *LITERARY VOICE: A Study of Literary Writings and Trends* (February 1996): 14.
8. There two terms are also used by Ihab Hussan to explain the fictional hero’s awareness of the tension created by the encroachment of the society upon its self. It is these two expressions which also colour the hero’s perception regarding the threat posed to his identity and his being by marauding socio- cultural ambience of dehumanization and demonic deconstruction.
9. Ihab Hussan. “The pattern of Fictional Experience” from *Modern American Fiction Essays in Criticism* ed: A Walton Litz (New York and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1973) 328
10. Ihab Hussan, ---?

11. Brain Attebery, *the Fantastic Tradition in American Literature* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1991).
12. Ihab Hussan, *Para criticisms* (Illinois) University of Illinois Press, 1975) 121- 151.
13. Ihab Hussan. 121-151
14. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1973)147
15. Northrop Frye, 146
16. Northrop Frye, 147
17. Northrop Frye, 147
18. Anita Desai, *The Zigzag Way* (London, Vintage, 2005)3

These lines are quotes by the author at the very inception of Chapter 1 and serve as a illuminating preamble to the central protagonist Eric's quest of discovery in his picaresque displacement from England to Mexico, in order to unravel and acquire an almost asoteric Knowledge from a dead person, none else than his grandmother. These lines also function as a barometer of Eric's reconstruction of his identity, awareness and affirmation.

- 20 Steven Connor, *Post Modernist Culture: An introduction to the theories of the contemporary* (Oxford and Cambridge, USA; Black well, 1995)133
- 21 Patricia Waugh, 194
- 22 Patricia Waugh, 196
- 23 Patricia Waugh, 196

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2. All further references have been incorporated as *CP*.
3. M. Rajeshwar, "Superstition and Psyche in Anita Desai's *CP*," *Feminist English literature*, ed. Manmohan k. Bhatnagar (New Delhi; Attantic publishers, 1999) 241.
4. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, ed *Men in Feminism* (Methum: New York and London, 1987) 4.
5. Ihab Hussan, *the Dismemberment of Qrpheus: Toward a Post modern literature* (New York. Oxford University Press, 1971) 12
6. Ihab Hussan, 13
7. R.K. Srinivasan Iyengar, *India Writing in English* (New Delhi; Sterling Publisher, 1985) 466.
8. Anita Desai at work: An interview," *Perceptives on Anita Desai*, ed Ramesh.k. Srivastava, (Ghaziabad : Vimal Prakeshan, 1984)218
9. Meena Belliapa, *Anita Desai: A study of her Fiction* A writers workshop Publication, Calcutta 1971.
10. Lawrence Thorton, *Unbodied Hope: Narcissium and the Modern Novel* (Landon and Toronto; Associated University press, 1984)11
11. Lawrence Thornton.
12. Christopher Lasch, *The culture of Narcissim in Modern Literatur--?*
13. Ihab Hussan, 5
14. Missing. Critic.
15. Northrop Fyre, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey ; Princeton University Press, 1973)151
16. Ihab Hussan, 13

17. Ihab Hussan, 13
18. Ihab Hussan, 13
19. Ihab Hussan, 13
20. D.S. Maini ,” *Cry, The Peacock as a poetic novel*, “ Indian Literature of the Past fifty years; 1917 – 1967.
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24. A Walton Litz, 142.
25. B. Rama Chandra Rao, *The Novel of Mrs Anita Desai; A study*, 56.
26. Ihab Hussan, “ The Pattern of Fictional Experiences” from *Modern American Fiction Eassay in Criticism*, ed; A. Walton Litz (New York and Oxford; Princeton University Press, 1973) 328
27. Ann Lowry Weir, *The illusion of Mayz: ?*
28. Ann Lowry Weir, 154
29. The Pattern of Fictional Experience, 328
30. The Pattern of Fictional Expreence 328.