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Mexico as a Historical Heterotope in Anita Desai's Novel *The Zig Zag Way*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to comprehend how, specifically in the prose narratives of the Indian author Anitha Desai, history and space are influenced and transformed by one another. Space and history intertwine in several ways throughout the novel *The Zig -Zag Way* reproducing history. This paper investigates the numerous ties and relationships between space and history. Connections show how heterotopias form when disparate parts of history and space get juxtaposed in a single location. Desai excels in her narrative technique, use of sources, and incorporation of the narrator's and interlocutor's multiple points of view. The particular method of portrayal Desai utilizes treats neither space nor history as primary classifications, attempting to place a historic-geological structure inside which numerous unstable snapshots of heterotopias create. This paper examines the connections between spatial encounters and memory, history's constituent, and space. It then examines how Desai's narratives critique cartographic space and how identities establish through the politics of space after exhibiting the connection between these two categories. These arguments show that Mexico is a space of heterotropic moments from Desai's historic-geographical scheme.

Keywords: History, Space, Heterotopia, Anitha Desai, Historico-geographical.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between history and space has become a significant area of inquiry in contemporary literary studies. Literary spaces

are no longer viewed merely as physical settings but as dynamic sites where memory, culture, identity, and history intersect. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia,

scholars have increasingly examined how literary texts construct alternative spaces that challenge conventional understandings of history and geography.

Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* (2004) presents Mexico as a complex historical landscape where multiple histories, memories, and identities coexist. Through the experiences of Eric and other characters, Desai reconstructs the forgotten history of Cornish miners in Mexico while simultaneously exploring questions of migration, belonging, memory, and cultural identity. The novel transforms Mexico into a heterotopic space in which historical narratives are constantly negotiated and reimagined.

This paper examines how Desai represents Mexico as a historical heterotope by analysing the relationship between space, memory, and history. Using Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia along with the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and Doreen Massey, the study argues that Desai's narrative challenges linear notions of history and constructs a multidimensional historical geography that connects the past with the present.

In *The Zigzag Way* by Anita Desai, we see a universe where the main protagonists move through an accumulation of the past by cutting new routes, descending ancient shafts, and following existing ones. Through this lengthy allegory, which educates each part regarding the book from its title and principal sections to the most episodic portrayals shading the Mexican scene, the book symbolically welcomes us to consider our way back to "where we come from". The spatial descriptions used by Desai ultimately lead the reader on his or her series of zigzags to the conclusion that preserving communal access to the past is a moral obligation that, when violated, fills the community with shadowed souls and haunted minds. However, all of this is beneath us and is just waiting to be discovered. Let us return to the

issue at hand, which comprehends Desai's writing.

Theoretical Perspectives on Space and Heterotopia

Over the past few decades, more and more people have come to believe that space plays a significant role in social and cultural interactions and transactions. Space is misunderstood as a passive container inhabited by various aspects of society and sociality, despite interventions from scholars and philosophers from varied entry points. Space does not consist of a single entity; naturally, it constructs and is constructed simultaneously. It's anything but a simple foundation upon social and verifiable cycles that occur through effectively engaging with the cycles of social presence (Soja, 1989). Edward Soja cites Henri Lefebvre's *l'espace vécu*, or "lived spaces," in evoking space. According to Soja (1989, p.18), Soja views space as "actually lived and socially created spatiality, concrete and abstract at the same time, the habitus of social practices." Soja goes on to describe space as a "triangle" of social, physical, and mental or psychological spaces within which spatiality is socially produced and exists both as concrete specialties and as an "embodiment" and medium of social life itself (Soja, 1989, p.18). Social actions and relationships, physical space of material nature or actual human geography, and mental space of cognition and representation, which includes landscape images and mental maps' symbolic relevance and personal significance all, contribute to spatiality (Soja, 1989, p. 18).

History and Spatial Memory in *The Zigzag Way*

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the connection between Desai's interpretation of history and space. It will look at how the different components that comprise history and space in the story frame distinctively different heterotopic minutes. To better comprehend one's engagement with space as something not dead, fixed, un-dialectical, or immobile, this

construction of a heterotopia that is never entirely stable or constant has the potential to re-read and re-create history in various ways (Foucault, 1980). Desai creates moments (and locations) that defy the foundations of history and geography by juxtaposing incompatible elements of space and time. These moments and locations can only be understood when analyzed through the critical category of heterotopia. This is mostly because brief history demonstrates a deficiency of the subjects that engross Desai's work. Her prose narratives depict a deviant history that makes use of space and elements of space to open the door to the idea of a more radical historico-geographical framework in which history and space both play efficient roles in revealing the relationships that define the life and time that has survived the bloody and brutal excesses of the twentieth century.

Desai weaves together fragment of forgotten memories of Cornwall-based immigrants who crossed the Atlantic in search of a new beginning in Mexico's gold and silver mines. The narrative of the book takes the reader on a journey through a number of historical chapters—European, Mexican, and Huichol—tying together events in Mexico, Cornwall, New England, and Vienna. Let's start by looking at the first time Desai interacts with history: in the abstract and ironic epigraph that opens the book's first chapter.

The ancient Chinese believed time is not a ladder one ascends into the future but a ladder one descends into the past.

Time is a Ladder(1)

Memories of turbulent history-emerge and re-envelop the fictional space as the rich seams of the Mexican ghost mining town reveal the life of the Cornish Jacks during revolutions triggered by Emiliano Zapata. As the characters re-enter a passage to New Spain, retrace their history, and re-locate the lost tale, the novel's hybrid fictional world is brimming with attempts to uncover the past. Eric is a touchy

young fellow who is self-estranged and detached from his milieu. He is unable to meet academic demands and is tired of conducting his research on the immigration pattern. Eric decides to go with his girlfriend Em, who takes sabbatical to study medical sciences in Mexico. Eric, depressed, is captivated by Mexico's breathtaking natural beauty. He resolves to overcome his sense of purposelessness and isolation. Eric's quest to find out what happened to his family in a Mexican ghost town where young Cornish miners died 100 years ago. The plight of Eric's grandparents and their community is sympathetically furnished by Desai. The spots wherein they reside have now become phantom towns.

These inconsistencies between memories and objective historical truth open the door for a retelling of history and call into question the historical narrative's presumption of impartial objectivity.

Mexico as a Heterotopic Space

Our sense of space has evolved along with our ideas about existence and time. According to Michel Foucault (1986), the lengthy, glacial periods of the 19th century are now a thing of the past; ours is the era of gaps. "We are in the age of simultaneity: the age of juxtaposition, the age of the close and distant, side by side, scattered. Our vision of the world now, in my opinion, is more like a network that connects points and engages with itself than it is like a long life expanding through time. (Foucault, 1986, p. 23).

According to Foucault, relations of proximity and relationships among sites determine what space is in our time. As a result, we live in what are basically sets of interactions "that delineate sites which are irreducible to one another". In contrast to these regular spaces we use, Foucault speaks of the heterotopia, which he defines as places or things that "have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in a way that makes the set of relations they happen to signify, mirror, or

reflect questionable, neutral, or invented." (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). He lists various characteristics of heterotopias. These concepts lead to the idea that heterotopias frequently serve as venues where various disparate and incompatible areas juxtaposition.

Cornish miners who left poor Cornwall behind in the 1800s shared the recklessness and crossed the high seas to descend the rough-hewn log ladders of the Mexican mines in the hope of reclaiming the raked silver and gold mines of Mexico that had been destroyed and abandoned in the wars of independence of Spain. The melting names of gold mines revive distant memories of a Cornish miner's search for gold flakes. Desai imagines bringing to life the lost history of Mexico and showing how the repressed memories of the Cornish miners dare not come out and explode in a swirl of familiar words that evoke a forgotten past.

A dark history returns to the present and unfolds in the pitch darkness of abandoned caves. Echoes of long-forgotten history resonate and seem amplified by the complete absence of light. The sounds of revolution, the atrocities committed by the silver barons, the pounding of horse hooves reappear as Vera descends the "ladder of repressed memories". The sparkling veins of memory ore of life evoke the ghosts of the past, leading the reader into the unrecorded stories of personal history and revealing the collective memory of the Cornish miners who worked in the mines of Mexico.

Identity, Migration, and the Recovery of the Past

Eric experiences a daunting journey as he moves from one culture to another and the zigzagging path of miners and immigrants in a fictional space. The concept of examining the past through this metaphor sheds light on the parallels between these journeys.

Eric's journey in to his family's history takes him through time, retracing his grandfather's path as an immigrant from Cornwall to Mexico to start a new life in the

United States. The miners from Cornwall in the fictional setting struggle to find a comfortable place in the two cultures, constantly feeling like both insiders and outsiders. *The Zigzag Way* by Desai explores the co-existence of the present and the past, emphasizing the contrast between real-life experiences and the disconnected past.

Eric and Em, the book's protagonists, represent the author's perspective on authors who "stroll around and chat" (ZW 26) to learn about other people's lives and patiently wait for a spark of inspiration to capture a lighted scene and capture the intense experience in words on paper. In the current trend of globalised writing, it is only natural for the Indian diasporic writer to shift his gaze towards Western worlds, examine how history has shaped and reconfigured destinies in other continents, be it Europe or Latin America, search for analogues or opposites of India, capture the links between the present and the past by recoding images and incidents of the immigrant experience, and "to let a wider and more expansive view takeover and transform his world" (TZZW 23).

Eric enters a cemetery to find his grandmother's grave in order to come to terms with his own selfhood. The celebration of the Day of the Dead is the last portion of "La Noche de los Muertos." As Eric arrives at his grandmother's burial on this particular day, the narrative comes to close. Eric honors his ancestor in particular way on this day with Mexicans and is reunited with her.

"And you - you're Paul, aren't you?" Vera asks the version of the sprite she summoned to speak with Eric, who she had confused for Paul. I anticipated your visit. To wait for his reaction, she sat down on the wall. (TZZW 182)

He feels certain of his connection to Mexico thanks to the grandmother's supernatural visit; even though she is magical her exactness is outlined with care:

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 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 softer, more organic one of mountain herbs like thyme, lavender, and rosemary that looked odd to be growing in that unfriendly debris and stoniness, yet may have been since their scent was visibly there. (TZZW181)

Then, the history's layers are revealed and his life is given direction. His life is cheered and his perspective is clarified when he confronts his history. At the conclusion, she leads Eric towards the grave while it's "rising from the wall," but since Eric is a live spirit, the wall stands between them. He was about to climb over and follow, but as he was looking down for a base, she dissolved. (185). It breaks there verve, and he finds that he has travelled from the present to the history and back again, gaining expansive knowledge of the diversity of societies, political fermentation, and realities of the mining sector. Still, he has been successful in honoring his fathers and understands the missing link in erecting his own identity.

While ambulating and mooching along the course of the narratives, Desai's narrators execute a cognitive and emotional mapping of the areas they visit. They also recall and recover literal tidbits through association. These associations are intermittently conterminous, intermittently lapping, and intermittently hugely unlike. The narrators' conduct of remembering and recovering history appear to give a notice of a synoptic view of history through what Macfarlane (2007) refers to as "story charts," which are "Spatial expressions in forms that embody our unique gestures of the terrain and help us deeply understand places" (p. 142), places that are constituted by and correspond of colorful literal moments. Through a narrative that attempts to anatomize the literal and geographical rudiments'

palimpsest, through a narrative that forgoes scientific incisiveness in favour of imaginative associations, emotional gestures, creative conjectures, and comparisons, Desai's narrators strive to unload the palimpsest of the historico-geographical points.

In "Of Other Spaces," written in 1986, Foucault demonstrates heterotopic spaces via a series of relations that give compendiums an idea of the political and social processes that prevail there. The places that "contemporaneously represent, contest, and invert" the sets of relations of the society or civilization that they constitute are what Foucault finds intriguing in heterotopias. According to Foucault, heterotopias' functions change with time. It's subject to change as the society in which a certain heterotopia is positioned undergoes change. Certain settings that are both "legendary and real disputation of the space in which we live" are described by Foucault as being like a heterotopia in conceit form.

Heterotopia, Narrative, and Historical Reconstruction

Heterotopias give different backups for our nightly living surroundings. Indeed, if he rejects the idea of heterotopias as inadequate, David Harvey (2000) defines it as a prospective volition that "might be explored and can take the shape and form where a notice of morals and processes can most effectively be mounted" (p. 184). While Desai's stories aim to expand the bounds of time and space, heterotopias are those transitory moments with clear yet separate borders. Naturally, these borders are precious and fragile. Heterotopian boundaries are constantly disintegrating and crystallizing. According to Foucault, when heterotopias start operating at their peak, "men arrive at a kind of absolute break with traditional time."

Desai compares multitudinous factors that appear to warrant a common ground, which is when heterotopia enters the picture. The heterotopia is a type of unpredictable place

created by similar closeness, and it has the capacity to serve as a counter-site that may "contemporaneously represent, contest, and invert" the relations that shape both the order of space and the jotting and narrative of history. Heterotopias have community and simultaneity, which can promote critical mindfulness. Desai's stories serve as a perfect illustration of this. Desai uses heterotopia as a digressive device to have his narrators question the interplay between history and terrain, power and knowledge.

By questioning ideas about position and history, Desai's novels give dramatic exemplifications of digressive heterotopias. At specific moments, the history, present, and future all clash at one place in space, generating a "collision of future and history" (Stuart, 2002, p. 45). The sense of freedom is created by these hassles. These, opposing places serve as "contemporaneously legendary and real contestations" (Foucault, 1986).

As Massey suggests a particular type of order and chance combination is needed for spatial (re) configuration in an open space- time. According to Foucault (1980, p. 69), one can understand the process by which knowledge serves as a source of power and disseminates the goods of power by analysing knowledge in terms of region, sphere, implantation, relegation, and transposition. As a result, Desai's stories and (re) donations of history come from dynamic processes made up of colourful heterotopic spatio- literal moments.

CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* presents Mexico as more than a geographical location; it becomes a heterotopic space where history, memory, identity, and culture converge. Through Eric's journey into his ancestral past and the rediscovery of the forgotten experiences of Cornish miners, Desai demonstrates that history is neither fixed nor linear but continually reconstructed through spatial experiences and cultural memory. The novel reveals how

abandoned mines, cemeteries, landscapes, and festivals function as heterotopic sites that preserve multiple temporalities and challenge dominant historical narratives.

Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, this study has shown that Desai transforms Mexico into a counter-space where incompatible histories coexist, allowing suppressed memories to resurface and marginalized voices to be acknowledged. The interaction between geography and history enables the novel to question traditional representations of space while emphasizing the interconnectedness of place, identity, and memory.

Ultimately, *The Zigzag Way* illustrates that spatial experiences are essential to understanding historical consciousness. By blending personal memory with collective history, Desai creates a multidimensional narrative that expands the possibilities of literary representation and reinforces the significance of heterotopia as a critical framework for interpreting contemporary diasporic fiction.

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