



## Search for Self in Anita Desai's *The Zig Zag Way*

**Dr. Kanchan Joshi**

Assistant Professor

Shri Niketan Arts Commerce

College, Nagpur

[kanchandjoshi@gmail.com](mailto:kanchandjoshi@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the prominent writers in Indian English literature as she added new themes and took it to the new heights. In *The Zigzag Way*, Anita Desai poses the problem of identity, rootlessness, insignificance, and alienation. She narrates the tale of emigrants, their voyage and problems faced by disrupted immigrants in the guest country. Eric, the American protagonist travels to Mexico in search of the legacy of his family. Eric's self-exploration has a zig zag pattern like the title of the novel. This paper attempts to show the existentialism philosophy in the novel *The Zig Zag Way*. It reveals the mysterious world which has different colours, violent history, and reality of the present.

Key words: emigrants, identity, alienation, quest, self-exploration

The Postcolonial Indian English Literature explores the subjugation and harassment of the natives during the imperial rule. During the imperial rule, cultural and moral life is mutilated. The literature produced by the Indian writers in English, is set against the backdrop of the 'Postcolonial' themes. The Indian English writers have written about 'Nationalism', 'Racism', 'Ethnicism' 'cultural identity'. They have dealt with many other themes such as 'rootlessness', 'alienation', 'labour exploitation', 'hybridity', 'poverty', 'identity crisis' and so on. The Postcolonial Indian English Literature has given the enormous scope to women writers. Anita Desai is well known writer in post-colonial writing who has successfully delineated the journey of the migrants in search of self. She explores the tales of emigrants, their voyage with the inner view of problems faced by dislocated crowd in the guest country. Desai in one of her novels, *The Zig Zag Way* describes the protagonist Eric's quest to find out his roots. He tries to reach up to his past in search of his identity. He takes a journey to the city of Mexico to

deal with the question of the past of his ancestors, and his origins.

The text investigates the mythical journey of Eric in search of his ancestor, heritage and ultimately his identity. *The zig zag way* is the story of expatriate and a traveller, filled with nuances which represents a new world through writer's capacious vision. *The Zigzag Way* is set in Mexico and Cornwall, in which she has uncovered a compelling chapter in Mexican history. It marks for an experimentation and endurance, the protagonist escapes from the present time in search of his roots to survive in everyday life.

Eric is a sensitive young man who is self-alienated and isolated from his milieu. He is tired of his own research on immigration pattern and unable to cope up with scholastic demands. Eric decides to accompany his girlfriend Em who gets sabbatical to Mexico to pursue her research in medical sciences. Dejected Eric gets mesmerised with the natural

beauty of Mexico. He determines to get over the feeling of purposelessness and solitude. Eric pursues his own private quest, he tries to probe into his family history to a Mexican ghost town, where hundred years before young Cornish miners toiled to death. Desai has depicted sympathetically the plight of Eric's grandparents and their community. The places in which they lived in, has now become ghost towns.

During Eric's journey he happens to meet 'Dona Vera,' a wife of a mining baron who suffers the same pain with a colourful dubious, European past. She has managed to leave Germany during the Second World War by marrying into a Mexican mining family. The formidable 'Queen of the Sierra', who runs a Research Centre and helps Huichol Indian the immigrant population. Dona Vera has a burden on her heart of the ill-treatment given to the miners by her husband's family when they own the mines. By working for Huichol Indians, she unburdens her conscious. She finds a solution for her alienation, "everyday she made herself ride miles out alone and learn how to endure the sun and thirst and solitude." (TZZW 73) She establishes her identity not just among Huichol but in the town also. She is recognized for her work. She emerges as a strong character who finds her true self and succeeds.

Eric collects a lot of information from Dona Vera's research centre about miners. Eric learns about his grandparents Davey and Betty, their marriage, and hazardous life of miners. He visualizes his own journey likewise his grandfather, the zig zag way he tries to enter his past. In the third part of the story 'Betty Departs' Eric's grandmother travels from Cornwall to Mexico to get married to Davey. She represents wives of the miners who leads a painful life with a little hope for better survival. Betty happily accepts the host land and its customs and became one of the communities. She establishes herself as a wife of miner and good-hearted woman. She listens to Davey as he expresses his views of her freeways. The happiness of Davey and Betty put to an end with the outbreak of Mexican revolution as they experience a hell of time in which Betty dies while delivering a baby.

Eric, to realise his own selfhood, visits cemetery to locate his grandmother's grave. The last part 'La Noche de los Muertos' is the celebration of the Day of the Dead. On this day, the story comes to an end as Eric reaches his grandmother's graveside. On this special day, with Mexicans, Eric pays honour in a special manner to his ancestor and gets unified with her. Desai with her enigmatic way brings forth the version of sprite which is mistaken Eric for Paul and starts dialogue with him, "And you – you're Paul, aren't you? I thought you might come. She sat herself down on the wall, ready for his response." (TZZW 182) The mystical arrival of the grandmother makes him sure of his association with Mexico, although 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 much lighter, more natural one of herbs like lavender, rosemary and thyme, mountain herbs that seemed unlikely to be growing in that hostile rubble and stoniness but perhaps were since their essence was clearly present. (TZZW 181)

Here, the layers of history are unravelled and gets a direction to his life. He stands face to face with his past which brightens his life and clears his insight. At the end, she takes Eric towards the grave 'rising from the wall' but being a living spirit Eric cannot cross the wall, "The wall stood between them. He intended to climb over and follow but, as he looked down for a foothold in order to do so, she disappeared." (185). It unveils the magical spell, and he realises his journey from present to past and back to present with rich experience of cultural diversity, political upheaval, and reality of mining industry. However, he has succeeded in paying homage to his ancestors and realises the missing link in building his own identity.

Thus, *The Zig Zag Way* is a magical novel with mysterious and disturbing episodes which

poses darker violence. It is inspired with history, plight of communities and a sense of compassion. The Zig Zag way is an expedition for the renewal of past and search of one's ancestry. Desai has woven the threads of history and present life to identify the self. She has brought the past and present together to complete the quest of the characters.

#### **Works Cited**

Aggarwal Priyanka, Batra J. C. Search for Authentic Existence in Anita Desai's Novel The Zigzag Way. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*. Volume 4, Issue 4, April 2016, PP 60-62. <https://www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijSELL/v4-i4/9.pdf>

Abirami V.P. Post-colonial Indian Writing in English Literature and Nationalism. *Language in India*. ISSN1930-2940. Pp165-170 <http://www.languageinindia.com/oct2018/stjosephs/abirami.pdf>

Igoudjil Kamel M. Counter-Hegemonic Discourse as a Counter-Myth of Empowerment in Anita Desai's The Zigzag Way. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311982998>

Moharir, Kanchan. Diasporic Consciousness in Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Desai: A Critical Study. *Doctoral Thesis*. R. T. M. Nagpur University, Nagpur. January 2019.