



Memory the Archetypal Landscape of Identity in Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*

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Abstract:

Memory holds a supreme power in preserving past, culture, heritage and history. When memory acts as a narrative tool, it can construct and transcend historical framework for past, present and future. In the novel, *The Zigzag Way* Anita Desai uses memory as a narrative tool to explore the history of silver mining in Mexico and Huichol community. The protagonist Eric connects with his past and cultural heritage through the journey. Anita Desai unravels the beauty of past through the characters of Eric as well as Doña Vera. Myths weaved with the beads of collective memory creates a landscape of human life and experience. This paper attempts to examine the role of memory as a narrative device to explore journey of self-realization. The paper studies collective memory as a framework for the existence of Mexican mythology in the novel *The Zigzag Way*. The exploration of memory through the ladder of time is captivating as it is woven with the tapestry of experience, nostalgia, consciousness. Memory resonates with the past by exploring the complexities of life which can act as a discourse of time. The shared memory and experience weave the identity and sense of community.

Keywords: *Memory, Collective Unconsciousness, Identity, Nostalgia.*

The *Zigzag Way* (2004) novel by Anita Desai which explores the theme of memory, past and indigenous culture of Mexico. The novel revolves around the life of Eric and his accidental journey from America to Mexico digs out the collective memory of Mexican coal miners. Throughout the novel, Eric experiences epiphanies of memory which sheds light into the Huichol Community and their rituals. Begins with an epilogue, novel runs in a zig zag way which has an intricate structure of narrative hooded in the discourse of time. Desai explores Eric's grandparents' emigration as well as his own life. The novel is divided into four parts, starting with an epilogue through which Anita Desai opens an exploration of past through present. Mexican history and culture, especially the Huichol community is narrated in the novel *The Zigzag Way* through the beads of myths and memory. Eric is identifying his past and cultural history through Mexico and he weaves the interconnections through memory and experience. In the childhood, Eric heard stories of silver mines in Mexico from his grandfather. After years, Eric recollects words and names which were the treasure holders of social and cultural history. It is the memory that helps and guides Eric to follow his ancestor's life in Mexico. The collective memory embedded in the rituals and culture of Huichol community upholds the identity of the protagonist.

Eric's journey in the novel can be identified as a trajectory of identity and shared experiences. He started his journey to Mexico with fragments of names from his Cornish grandfather who worked in the silver

mines of Mexico. Later on his journey, Eric weaved the web of his identity, culture, past from this scattered names with the beads of his Mexican journey experience. Anita Desai narrates the novel in nonlinear way which makes the reader to experience the trajectory of Eric's journey from past to present by showcasing the landscape of his ancestral memory. The protagonist was unaware of his past, culture, land and his journey was also without any directions. The memory that was embedded in his head guided and gave direction to his journey to ancestral past and Huichol community.

Eric, an American graduate in history wants to work on immigration patterns of Boston, but he was aimless and clueless. His Mexican journey was impetuous and he joined with his girlfriend Em's research trip to Mexico. Accidentally, his explorations in the City paved the way to attend the lecture by Dona Vera about the Huichol community. She mentioned the Mexican names which opened the door of memories to Eric and he started journey of self and past. He decoded his destination which was Sierra, an old mining town where his grandparents lived. But, the destination was just a starting point for his pilgrimage to Huichol community and identity. Eric entered to the city of Mexico as a tourist and unravels the dark history of Mexican silver miners. He explores his grandparent's: "Davey Rowse" and "Betty Jennings" life through the Mexican journey.

Davey came to Mexico to build a new life in the Mexican silver mines and later Betty Jennings of Delabole, Cornwall joined him there. Betty wrote letters from Mexico City to her father and sisters describing her married life with Davey and their cottage in the hill side. She portrayed her life in the cottage as beautiful as the Mexican hills and hid the hardships of life in the cottages of miners. His grandmother lost her life during her childbirth cannot return to her homeland during the time of Mexican revolution. The struggle and pain of Cornish miners in Mexico is documented through Davey's and Betty's life which was the dark unexplored past and existence of Eric. Eric started his journey to Sierra in search of his grandmother's grave, whom couldn't return to her homeland.

Eric's quest for past was moulded by memory which was deeply embedded in his unconsciousness; that was the unhindered spirit of his ancestral journey. Fragmented pieces of past and memories weaved in the landscape of Eric's mind which started its journey to interconnect with present at the right time. Memory recurred as the archetypal patterns of exploration of ancestry in a zig zag way like the title of novel depicts the ascending leap of time. Desai describes this moment as serendipitous because randomly Eric attends the lecture by Dona Vera about "Huichol Indians and their beliefs in Peyote". In the lecture, she mentioned the words such as "Sierra de los Catorce", "La Purísima" which were the magical words for Eric that exploded the spirit to connect the lost beads of past and his mind was filled with images of familiarity when he heard these Mexican words. He was descending to his ancestral past to configure his present and identity which was in the unconscious realm of memories. The whole Mexican journey was an exploration to fill up the memory puzzle of past with the fragmented grids. The words he got from the lecture were the ciphers too solve his puzzle of exploration and realization.

In the novel, Anita Desai carefully depicts the Huichol people and their bright culture with subtle details of their dress which were of vibrant colours and different motifs such as "snake", "peyote". In the fourth part titled as 'La Noche de los Muertos' which means "Day of the Dead" in Mexico, the narrative delves into the magnificent descriptions of Mexican Indian Mythology. It starts with the creation story of Huichol Indians and their gods. Mexican landscape blends with the mythical landscape of Mexican traditions. Desai meticulously curates myth as narrative depicting "Tatéwari", the fire god of Huichol Indians and "Kauyumari" who is the deer spirit. Then the narrative flows into the holy mountain, "Wirikuta" and Huichol's inseparable connection with peyote. The immense spiritual and cultural resonance of "peyote cactus" with that of Huichol Indians is presented through this. It is the sacred food and it grows only in the holy mountain. Songs, dress, food, rituals everything is deeply rooted to peyote and the deer spirit. On the 'Day of the Dead', Huichols climb the holy mountain and collect the cactus which symbolise the

connection to the ancestors. They experience the sacredness by eating the collected peyote and fall in to their dreams; they are experiencing time of their ancestors. 'Day of the Dead', a pilgrimage for Huichols for their roots and they never uprooted the peyote completely, because they don't want to uproot their ancestry which connects with the past, present and future.

Eric's climb the holy mountain and he experience the pilgrimage which was his search for ancestral past. He descent into the sacredness and richness of Huichol Indians which was his destiny as well as the destination of the journey. Eric unveil the reservoir of the unconscious collective shared memory which was the essence of the Mexican traditions and mythology. Here memory and myth act as powerful tools for narration. As Jan Assman in *Cultural Memory and Civilization* quotes "The art of memory relates to the individual and presents techniques to help form personal memory" (16).

In conclusion, Eric in *The Zigzag Way* identifies his self through the powerful existence of memory that was deeply embedded in his life. His journey to Mexico was accidental but exploration of Sierra Madre Oriental was his self-realization. Weaving through all the beads of experience and memory Eric found out his core of existence and what guided him to his grandmother's grave. Eric reaching the holy mountain and participating in "La de loss Muertos" shows this revival of memory and past. Eric climbed through the ladder of time but in a nonlinear way to create his own identity.

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Declaration

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