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Journey into The Past

A Study of the Novel The Zig- Zag Way

Abstract:

From ancient times people have been journeying from one place to another with different mottoes, whether it is physical journey in search of materialistic accomplishments or spiritual journey for self fulfillment. Man has always been in search of some thing to fulfill his desires or to know about himself; about his past, present and future to get answers of many unsolved questions which make him unstable and unsettled. By finding answers to them he feels complete accomplished since life is a journey of many labyrinths which a human has to resolve to get his destination or salvation. Eric, the protagonist of Anita Desai's novel *The Zig- Zag Way* is one such person, who has unknown feeling of intrusion or unidentification in his present environment due to unawareness of his cultural identity. He unexpectedly happens to journey into the past to search his family roots by which he gets self fulfillment. Though through out the journey, he faces many difficulties, at last gains the knowledge of life which makes him feel complete.

Key Words:

Journey, Intruder, Non belongingness, Environment, cultural identity, Immigration, family

Introduction:

The ancient Chinese believed time is not a ladder one ascends into the future but a ladder one descends into the past; the past where one loses one's true identity and lives in present a life of disdain and disharmony. To redeem one's true bliss one should know the purpose of his journey; where we are coming from and what is our destination unless the whole life will be spent in utter disappointment and dissatisfaction since the background or past to which one belongs is an entity which gives a sense of security and becomes part of one's self and any distance from it effect one's sensibilities. The protagonist of Anita Desai's *The Zig- Zag Way* is one such person, who shuffles in the space between past and future and feels the present non belonging and disconnected to his true self since he lost his cultural identity which speaks who he is actually and gives him a feel of belongingness. So he journeys into his past to know the true purpose of his life.

Anita Desai is a great analyst of psychological insights and inner concerns. Her novels depict the kaleidoscopic image of the minds of her characters with a mesmerizing art. Her keen observation of emotions and feelings add greater debts to her themes. Her novels are reflective of social realities which she depicts through a psychological perspective but does not look at them as a social reformer. Her earlier novels revolve around woman's quest for identity, the repression she faces within the family and society, marital disharmony, generation conflicts and anti-Semitism but her later novels focus on the spirit of nationality, social problems existing in the contemporary society, east- west cultural collision, Vedanta and Philosophy. The present novel too deals with crises for cultural identity in a psychological perspective and with a male protagonist and male centered narrative unlike her previous novels with women protagonists and their psychological traumas.

Eric is a graduate student from Boston University, who loses his interest in his work of turning his thesis on immigration patterns in nineteenth century Boston into a book on immigration in general. At that moment he feels his life is so boring. When he finds his girl friend Emily is going to Mexico on medical field training, he thinks it an opportunity to break his boredom and get some inspiration to complete his book for which he has been granted funds from his University. When his certain and efficient girl friend asks the purpose of his coming to Mexico he replies,

If I come with you to Mexico, I am sure ideas would just come flooding in.... I might come across on some thing in Mexico that would put me on the right track. (Pg-14)

This statement of Eric and the novel allegorically invites us to search for our own spiritual roots to where we come from. Eric before leaving for Mexico goes to his family living in Maine and gives the information that he would shortly be visiting Mexico with his girl friend.

Eric though finds himself born and brought up in a fishing family on the shores of Maine he never enjoyed fishing or that environment. Lobsters and fish as food always repulse him. The hustle and bustle of that place too irritates him and he always feels alienated in that environment. This unease within him at all times surprises him and suggests him to find a world which could be called his own. Not only Eric but Eric's father too always feels an intruder in that clan and always busies himself with accounting the family business to keep away from the hustle and bustle of that family as its members overwhelm him. If we peep into their lives the cause of their detachment is their up rootedness from that Irish Catholic tribe where they are living. Eric is misfit to that environment so he from the day one runs away from home, first to boarding schools and then to Universities.

He finds totally unfit for the life in the family's boatyards and fishing boats. Lobsters as food totally repelled him. The one direction he could take was to the Universities and libraries of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Returning to the clan remained as daunting and bracing as a plunge into the Atlantic Ocean. (Pg-17)

In the above description Eric's repulsion for lobsters as food and his dislike for that fishing locality denote his non belongingness to that environment. He and his father is genetically do not belong to that place so their choice of wearing is also does not match with the attire of people of that place.

Men and woman dressed identically in blue jeans, plaid flannel shirts and gum boots... it was clearly the two of them the only men who wore neither plaid flannel shirts nor gum boots. (Pg-19)

Though they have lived in the same place for many years, they still remain different and unique from others suggesting how one's genes dominate in determining one's traits. Eric's mother likens them to "a pair of herons, pair of exotic visitors to her work a day world". (Pg-20)

On the day of departure to Mexico he comes to know that his British father was born there in Mexico and his Cornish grand father had once worked in the mines of Mexico and his grand mother died in Mexico while giving birth to his father and buried in a cemetery over there. This discovery about his past connection to Mexico makes his journey more meaningful. Eric now believes that his encounter with his past will help him to find out a meaning to his present life.

Reaching Mexico the sensuous and unflinching beauty of Mexico leaves a mesmerizing effect on Eric. Though it is located far away in the mountains with a very little population the grandeur of the city surprises the protagonist who feels himself reborn as traveler and as person too. Since the previous places he lived he always felt mismatch to his mentality. Not only had

the shores of Maine but even the discolored Boston where he studied made him feel out of action and barren. He is in surprise and happiness asks Em that why she did not tell him about this place before.

Eric's girlfriend sets off with her colleagues to conduct some fixed operations. Feeling quite lonely in room Eric too starts out to pursue his own private quest of tracing his family roots. While searching his family history he happens to meet Dona Vera an aristocratic and mysterious woman, who is called as the 'Queen of Serra' and runs a research centre for Huichol Indians, a local tribe of Mexico in Serra Madre. Eric takes her lecture on the local Huchol tribe. Though the lecture is in Spanish not easy to follow for Eric, still some names and images through speech stirs up his memories of childhood when he was only of five years old at his grandfather's home in Cornwall. Eric notes down some of the names as he wants to unearth the connections. For him it is like "a burrow through a tunnel back into the old country to the old man and his toys."(Pg-34) Eric tries to recollect his past memories of twenty years but they escape him like "so many gold fish darting into the turbid waters of Mexico cities evening streets."(Pg-37) The words that come in between Dona Vera's speech cast a dramatic effect on Eric's psyche.

He had heard them before each had an image, a memory linked to it that he struggled to re construct. It was if they were the words of a song he used to know or heard singing.

(Pg-32)

All of a sudden his mind begins to recollect the stories of his grand father in faraway England mentioning the same names. He used to tell Eric the stories of his working in vast silver mines in Mexico as miner. He never again hears them as he never returns to his grand father again. For him those memories are like "a small box with few objects which his father brought after his grand father's death and put on attic and never opened it again" (Pg-34) since his father

feels memories and nostalgia should be abandoned like excess baggage. Eric shares his experience of encounter with those word images with Emily as,

Like stumbling into a rabbit hole falling till all was a welter of strange names churning around him. Then with a bump landing upon the startling awareness, that many of these were actually familiar to him. (Pg-32)

The remembered stories from his consciousness induce him to investigate further the life of his ancestors and make these fragile but important links strong one and helping him for the book he is writing on immigration. He sets to Sierra Madre and silver mines. Staying at Dona Vera's residence from her library he reads the books related to mining industry in Mexico, where his grand father used to work. He finds evidences of his grand parents living in ghost town near Dona Vera's centre. His grand parents Betty Jenings and Davey Rowse travelled from Cornwall England to the mines of Mexico for employment and lived a life with subtle bonding though much external insecurity like mining revolutions and nightmarish movements of killing people in accidents during mining. Eric's grand mother Betty dies while child's birth during revolution time. She lies buried in mining town hill top cemetery and Davey left alone with his infant. He hands over the infant to Betty's sisters who bring him up. Davey returns to mines but they were abandoned. He goes back to England since war breaks out in Europe. He joins the army and gets injured during war and nursed by a woman whom he marries later and fetches back his son Paul from his aunts. Paul being stranger in his father's family and environment runs away from home and works in a ship and on his voyage stops at Maine cost and marries Eric's mother and settles down there with her family.

In the end of the novel Eric wanders in the cathedral of ghost town in search of his grand mother's grave. He buys some chrysanthemums to put on his grandmother's grave. Here the

novelist describes their meeting as a spell where his grand mother appears as a young woman and meets Eric standing her at the one side of the grave yard wall and Eric on the other side as they are of two different worlds. She speaks to him about his father and grand father, their family roots and her waiting for his father and grand father with pain in her eyes. This happens at the time of early dawn when the dark night meets early day light. With the increasing day light she vanishes leaving the chrysanthemums on her grave which hints Eric her grandmother's grave and her presence. His spell breaks with the ringing of church bells. The church bells are signal call for both alive and dead to their worlds. Here the novelist speaks about Eric's past as "The past was alive here - crepuscular and underground but also palpable"(Pg-115) which means here past is alive in crepuscular light which separates the time near dusk and dawn, between full dark and full light that in term joins Eric's past and present which happens on the festive day of the dead. Mexicans honor their dead on the festival "El dia de los muertos."

Finally Eric discovers his grand mother's grave and his past as legacy which changes the meaning of his life. By exploring his past he could complete his book too. This metaphorically suggests that some one needs to connect with something to exist. Like Eric many people among us find them selves alienated and unadjusted in their own worlds .

In her long career as a writer, Anita Desai has always been dealing with travelers, researchers and refugees and people looking for homes and identities in faraway places. Desai's protagonists are seekers and their delight and glory lies in heir struggle against odds of life. Like Laila and Matteo the protagonists of Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* were unadjusted to their worlds which they had to call their own. The environment, where they were born and brought up was unacceptable to their souls. So they were in search of a world which is suitable to their inner

self. Both Laila and Matteo born in different western countries find their spiritual destination in India and settles down here forever.

In a similar manner Eric too goes to Mexico as a quester and returns as a reborn person getting answers to all his unsolved questions. Eric's physical travel through Mexico is a metaphor of his journey into his past to find a meaning to his present life. By locating his place in the fabric of his family history, with those threads he weaves his lives fabric.

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