

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Struggle for Self-discovery in Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*

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Struggle for Self-discovery in Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Hum Prasad Sharma has completed his thesis entitled “Struggle for Self-discovery in Anita Desai’s *The Zigzag Way*” under my supervision. He carried out his research from September 2010 to June 2011. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Struggle for Self-discovery in Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*", submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Hum Prasad Sharma, has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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Abstract

Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* stands as an outstanding text depicting multicultural strands in postcolonial situation. This work basically focuses on the zigzag journey of one of the main characters, Eric, who tries to establish his identity in an alien culture with his sincere and ceaseless effort. Being an American of Cornish origin, Eric tries to be familiar with unfamiliar culture, meets different people from different origins and asks many questions about the true history of Mexico. But his quest for 'root' for safety, security and identity ends with ghostly reality. Eric's encounter with his grandmother's ghost at a local celebration called *La Noche de los Muertos* makes him more confused about his identity and puts him in cultural dilemma. Both in America and Mexico, Eric does not realize as 'one' rather he feels as 'other'. So, he is a displaced individual torn between American and Mexican culture. The link between his multiplicity of identity from past to present has no reconciliation. This failure of reconciliation has generated a problem of identity crisis.

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I. Eric's Journey: A Quest for Root and Expatriate Sensibility

This research focuses on Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* (2004), set in Mexico with flashbacks to America and England. It primarily explores the journey of one of the main characters, Eric, including others and depicts the life of other family members of Eric which is uncertain. Eric is an uncertain, awkward young man, a traveller and researcher who goes to Mexico from America with the purpose of searching his family history. In this novel, there is fusion between past and present. The novel begins in the past with Eric's act of beginning his research on Cornish immigrants, who ended up either dying, being killed or having to leave Mexico and ends in the present at a local celebration called *La de loss Muertos*. Eric encounters a ghost from the past and sees his own path into the future. Eric's uncertain journey from the USA to Mexico is not only about his research on immigrants but also about the exploration of self. So, this project tries to analyze Eric's struggling journey to find his identity. While analyzing this, this applies the concept developed in postcolonial theories. It does not offer an elaborate analysis of postcolonial theories but the postcolonial issues related to identity and culture are taken into consideration while analyzing this text. It also doesn't offer the complete analysis of Desai's views on postcolonial issues like hybrid consciousness, sense of ambivalence, sense of loss, diaspora etc. but these issues are not avoided in the process of analyzing this project.

Anita Desai is an expatriate Indian woman novelist. So, there is a depiction of expatriate sensibility in her novels. Writing for her is a process of discovering truth, a necessity to think, to feel, to realize since she writes as instinctively as she breathes. What distinguishes Anita Desai from other writers is her preoccupation with the individual, the inner world of sensibility and the chaos inside his/her mind. Concerned exclusively with the personal tragedy of the individual, Desai brings cultural, social,

political and economic aspects in order to show how individual life is conditioned. As Shyam M. Asnani States, "Her forte is the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depth of the mind and bringing into relief the hidden contour of the human psyche" (143). Her fictional milieu is mostly overcast by shadows and half shadows, mist and fog, world half revealed and half concealed, partly real and partly fictitious. Here central theme is the "existential predicament of an individual which is projected through incompatible couples, acutely sensitive wives, and dismal, callous un-understanding ill-chosen husbands" (144). Desai's fiction seems to assuage both the tradition of American and English novel. As a result:

Her fiction takes its form and tone from polarities, opposites and irreconcilables, oddity, distortion of personality, dislocation of normal life, recklessness of behaviour, morbidity of temperament and malignancy of motive, these together with the profound poetry of disorder, radical forms of alienation, maladjustment and contradictions seems to have been preserved as the best of both the great traditions.
(144-45)

This aspect of Desai's fiction undoubtedly adds a new dimension to the Indian English novel. Turning inward, her fiction grapples with the intangible realities of life, plunging into the innermost depths of the human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the inner turmoil, the chaos inside the mind.

Her writing is an effort to discover, underlie and convey the significance of thing. She does not believe that literature ought to be confined within reality nor that it has further debt to society beyond the point of its being truthful for it is not expected to execute reforms, lay down laws or lead the people. Desai uses stream of

consciousness technique, flashbacks and interior monologues in her novels. As a result of this eminent use of flashbacks and stream of consciousness technique, the form of Desai's fiction becomes coincided with consciousness. According to Asnani Desai's fiction "soaks over the entire work, the plot being not same discernible, separate story but the vision from which it is told, so that the discreteness of character or traditional pattern of story are thrown abroad" (147-48). She lays no special emphasis on the plot construction, on the well-made novel with the traditional notion having a beginning, middle and the end. Whatever action there is in her novel, is part of the integral whole composed of the human psyche, the human situation and the outer and the inner rhythms. She makes no bones about the selection of the theme when she says, "My novels don't have themes at least not till they are finished, published or read, do I see any theme. While writing I follow my instinct, I follow flashes of insight and somehow come to the end and look back to see pattern of footprints on the sands" ("Replies" 4).

The most prominent feature of Anita Desai's art is the delienation of character. She is primarily interested in the portrayal of female protagonists as living in separate, closed world of existential problems and passions, love and hatred, fear and aspiration. They are dynamic always growing and changing viable and mutable. They are portrayed as engrossed with the present, look backward in time and visualize future as well. As a writer, Desai is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than everyday average ones:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been dives [sic] into some extremity of despair and so turned against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who can not follow it, whose

heart cries out the great no, who fights the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.

("Indian" 224)

Since Anta Desai is very careful, meticulous artist and since she can speak German, Bengali and Hindi beside English quite fluently, the choice of medium is very important for her. She has chosen English for her writing. An idea or an image, according to her, is seldom vital enough to set anyone on fire, to write there must be a passion for language as well, a familiarity and ease with the words and also a conception of them as perpetually growing, changing, renewing themselves and appearing in fresh and delightful forms. Desai says that she had first learned English when she went to school. It was the first language that she learned to read and write, so it became her literary language. Her comments as to why she writes in English:

My language (of the novels) is English and I find it answer as my needs. It is rich and flexible, supple and adaptable, varied and vital. I think it is even capable of reflecting the Indian character and situation. I think I have learnt how to live with the English language, how to deal with the problems it creates mainly by ignoring them. ("Indian" 226)

In her novels, Desai achieves that difficult task of moulding the English language and idiom to her purpose without self-conscious attempt of sounding Indian. Thus, known for her sensitivity in the structuring of the patterns of her novels, integrity of artistic vision, imaginative mind, keen observation, sharp awareness and competent craftsmanship, she has become a much sought after writer, sought after by publishers, and readers alike.

Anita Desai herself being a half-European descent and residing in USA, truly captures the cultural dilemmas in her novels. She depicts the problem of the immigrants in a new culture where her protagonists strive for an order. Sometimes they succeed and most of the time the new culture, custom, language and value systems of such society become hostile to them. Because of this hostility, they strongly feel the need of their home-the native land. Desai projects need of cultural negotiation and a meaningful existence amid the conflicting cultural spaces through the characters like Eric, in *The Zigzag Way*, occupying three different cultural backgrounds.

The Zigzag Way is a word map of Anita Desai's long established creative acumen. In this novel, she has added a cultural bridge based on historicity in order to relocate Mexican culture. It is an impressive tag of cultural creative hybrid in which she makes an analytic and interpretive exploration into the life and views of a distinct civilization with its recognizable historicity. It narrates the journey of Eric, the main character from America to Mexico. Eric has three different origins in terms of his identity. He was born in Cornwall, England but his father was born in Mexico. Now, he has been living in America. There is cultural hybridity and it has made Eric not having fixed identity. So, Eric is a diasporic individual. Eric's interest to do his research is to explore his real identity. The act of accomplishing his mission is not an easy task because he is unfamiliar with Mexican culture though his grandparents had lived there for a long time working in mines. Eric is unknown about his grandparents' life in Mexico because "Mexico is just of fairy tale to him" (21). So, Eric lives no stone unturned to have complete knowledge about his ancestry and his interaction with many people living in Mexico makes his research process quite easier.

This novel has been divided into four main parts. The first part of the novel describes the arrival of Eric in Mexico. It is about Eric's problem to adjust with unfamiliar culture and society. The second part of novel is associated with Dona Vera, an aging ethnographer, who fled Austria during World War II- possibly because of Nazi-connections and married a Mexican man, Don Roderigo, whose family fortune was made in mining. She is the self-appointed protector of the Huichol Indians, who delivers free lecture on them. The third section of *The Zigzag Way* tells the story of Eric's grandfather and the other Cornish immigrants, who ended up either dying, being killed or having to leave Mexico. The final part of the novel narrates the events of a local celebration called *La Noche de los Muertos* (155). In this celebration, Eric encounters a ghost from the past who happens to be the ghost of his own grandmother.

Desai begins each chapter of the novel with an epigraph. In the first chapter, Desai borrows some quotes from Elizabeth Bishop's 'arrival at santos', 1952, where she writes, "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 and immediately . . ." (3). Eric is a tourist for Mexicans. He has arrived in Mexico for the first time. A tourist needs a guide if he wants to be familiar with unfamiliar land. Eric also needs a guide and his quest-motif doesn't hesitate to ask questions and interact with many native people. It makes him easier to explore his ancestry. When he reaches Mexico, a woman offers to show him a room to stay in, which Desai describes:

Deeper and deeper down she took him, her felt slippers making no sound, and it was as if they were going further back in time, finally reaching a period that was surely medieval, for the door they arrived at

seemed hewn with an axe; when she turned the immense key in its immense lock, it created open on what he feared would be a cellar if not a dungeon. (5)

The woman tells him the detail information about the room and house where he is going to stay. After a while a young man comes out of the kitchen and says, "Oh, it is coming, coming soon more everyday for the festival you know. Many come for the *Dia de los Muertos* here, it is - it is - " (8). The young man's utterance makes Eric very much curious about the festival. Now, Eric starts thinking about his girlfriend, Em, who also has come to Mexico for her medical research: "Her field was the forests of Yucatan where mosquitoes teemed and malaria was rife" (13). Em is not sure whether Eric would be successful in his research or not because it is the first visit for him but she is confident for her research because she had visited Mexico many times. Before departing from Boston, Em had suggested him not to hurry for his research saying "you don't know Mexico, you've never been there, it might not prove the right place of all. You're an Americanist after all" (15). So, for her "visits to Eric's family were always hasty improvised, scrambled affairs, infrequent and rarely satisfactory" (15).

In the course of discussion, Em asks many questions with Eric about his ancestry. Em questions Eric whether he had asked his father about his birth place or not. Eric replies, "When I told Dad we were going to Mexico, he told me something I hadn't known before -that he was born there. He'd never told me that" (20-21). Em ridicules Eric for not having information about his father's birth place till then. Eric is ashamed for his ignorance and says, "Well you know my family is strange" (21). Eric's father was taken to England as an infant and brought up there. So, Eric's father was also not familiar with Mexico where he was born: "Mexico is just a fairy tale to

him " (21). Em asks about the whole plans with Eric. In fact Eric doesn't have any clear plan in Mexico. His journey to Mexico is not certain. He is moving in zigzag direction. Eric says that "only the vaguest one, Em. I'm hoping it will become clear. I have to wait for that 'Eureka' moment" (26).

In the course of his journey, Eric meets Dona Vera. Dona Vera talks about her work with Huichol Indians. Characterizing Dona Vera, Desai writes, "She was draped in Indian garments, stripped and flowered, trimmed and embroidered, red and green and blue and yellow like the feathers of a macaw, and sliver jewellery from her neck to her knees. Her head was long, elongated like the skulls one saw in museum" (30). On the lecture on Huichol Indians, she uses several languages and vocabularies. This took Eric several minutes and then the mixture of several languages and vocabularies that she employed caused an even further delay before he could conclude that her lecture was, in the main, in Spanish too. The pronounced accent she brought to it causes further confusion. Now, Eric asks something about the history of mining industry with her. She recites the names of mines-La Luz, Valenciana Los Lorenzos, Real de Monte, Real de Catorce, Sierra Madre Oriental. These words make Eric "tingle as if the pins and needles in his knees had spread all through him" (33). These old mining industries have become "centre for Anthropological and Ethnographic studies" (33). Eric had not thought about them in years, never having gone back to his father's English home or seen his grandparents since that one, early visit. When they died, his father had gone alone to their funerals in a churchyard in the deep, narrow valley in Cornwall where he had grown up. His father had brought back a small box with a few objects but immediately put it away in the attic and not reopened it. Perhaps "memories and nostalgia had to be abandoned, like excess

baggage, if one was to complete the experience his father had of emigration and a new beginning in a New world" (34).

Dona Vera associates with light and darkness which arise in her exploration of the "abandoned excavations and ruined entrances to shafts and tunnels that are the remains of Roderigo's mining state" (68). Specifically, it is while exploring these closed-off tunnels, while searching for abandoned traces of the area's mining past, that Dona Vera encounters the most powerfully described darkness in the book. Desai writes:

The silence was so intense that she could hear the wings of the Zopilotes circling watchfully above on currents of air; she had to imagine the sounds the mountain once have contained. She felt certain their echoes must still resound, and seeing the dark eye of a cave in the mountainside, entered it in the desire to hear that pounding and beating for herself. Perhaps even the hoofs of Zapata's horses, carrying the message of the Revolution: 'Tierray Liberatad !' Not a chink, not a shaft and not the possibility of one; it could only grow darker, blacker, more totally. (68)

The discussion between Eric and Dona Vera somehow helps to reveal the identity of both. But both of them are confused about their identity. Through the description of the mines by Dona Vera, Eric gets some information about his family history. It helps him for further exploration. He reads several books from Dona Vera's library. These books were about Mexican history. Some of the books were about the plight of Indian workers in Mexican mines. These books make Eric to think deeply about his grandfather who also had worked in such mines for his livelihood. Andre tells Eric something about Dona Vera's life. He says that "her family is well known you will see

its name everywhere-but she herself, not much. The family she married into was well known" (99-100). They owned mines, houses, streets. When president Diaz visited, it was in their house he stayed. But they did not live here themselves. They lived in Mexico, and Guanajuto, and Guadalajara. Dona Vera alone has chosen to live here, for many years now. She hated her connection to that family to Don Roderigo and left him many years ago. Some have said that she was a Nazi, a collaborator who got out before it was late. Some say the opposite that she was in the resistance, about to be betrayed. In Europe, nobody has known her Mexican life: "Her story has many chapters-European, Mexican, Huichol" (101). So, Dona Vera is deprived of her real identity.

After some description of Dona Vera's life, the narrative shifts again to Eric's family. It tells how Betty Jennings, Eric grandmother, was engaged to be married with Davey Rowse, Eric's grandfather. Eric's grandparents have their own distinct story to tell. Both Betty and Davey are from Cornwall but their first meeting was made by Hammer's family. Hammer's family had brought Betty as a maid for their children during the voyage from Liverpool to Veracruz. At the same time, Davey got a chance to meet her and discuss about their marriage. A few days later, they were married by Edgar Butler, a lay preacher. After marriage Betty went to Davey's Rowse's house which she describes:

We have moved into our own home in a row on the hillside amongst the other miner's cottages. They are not so unlike the ones at home in Cornwall, except they have red tiled roofs and the walls are as coloured as a rainbow-bright blue next to yellow, and pink of orange next to green. The windows that open onto the street have wooden shutters and iron grilles too. (120-121)

This description of Davey's house in Mexico shows the miserable condition of the miners who were destined to live in the house which were not well made. But the miners' families were living in peaceful environment. The peaceful and harmonious life was disturbed by the Mexican Revolution against the thirty year's totalitarian rule of Porfirio Diaz. The revolution badly affected the miners' life. Davey and Betty also became the victim of that revolution. Davey lost sight of Betty in the crowd that resembled "an anthill someone had stoned, ants running crazily in all directions but when the wagons the manager had obtained drew up at the door under cover of darkness that evening, he went in search of her to make sure she got on one" (140). He found that she was lying in Mrs. Moran's bed upstairs surrounded by panic-stricken women. She was "paler than Davey had ever seen her, biting her lips and drenched with perspiration" (141). With Mrs. Moran's help, Davey rolls her in blankets to put her in the wagon and carry her for treatment. Betty delivers her child but she loses her life in childbirth saving only the infant.

With the course of time, Davey's life falls in crisis. On the one hand, he loses his job due to revolution and on the other hand, he loses his wife. Similarly, he has the responsibility of bringing up his infant. Fortunately, La Bella Isadora takes the responsibility of bringing up his infant. After bringing up, she hands over the child to Davey requesting to name the child "Pablo" (148). But the child is named as Paul. When Davey marries another wife, Paul feels difficulty to live with his mother. So, he decides to look for work somewhere after leaving school. He does different jobs like shipping clerk, storekeeper of army supplies in different places. In a Fishing Village, he becomes successful to get a job of fishing business. There he happens to marry Madeleine who delivers the child Eric. Madeleine proves herself as protective of her son.

The final part of the novel centers to a local celebration called *La Noche de los Muertos*, the day of the dead. During the period of celebration, people remember their dead and offers something for them. They search the tomb stones of their dead ancestors before offering something for them. Eric also goes there and sees people washing, cleaning and decorating the tombs, lighting candles them the way, and welcoming them with flowers. He also sees "people passing through it, carrying sheaves of flowers, baskets of food and drink, bundles of candles and pots of copal, blankets and children. In the cemetery, they dispersed each in the direction of the graves they had come to tend" (162). Eric also carries flowers but he has no idea where to place them. He does not know his grandmother's burial place. So, Eric starts having conversation with many persons about it. Walking slowly and as soundlessly as possible, Eric tries to read the inscriptions and names on the stones under his feet. He finds inscription about Dona Vera's family. At the same time, the ghost of Dona Vera's husband, Roderigo appears and starts commenting about his wife. He says that "still playing the queen there I'm sure. The Queen of the Sierra ! what a farce" (172). He further says, "I could tell something about that, the man went on. The queen of exactly what, I could tell you. The bars and theatres where she made her living ! They were not so pretty and I should know since that is where I found her" (172).

Through the discussion with Roderigo's ghost, Eric comes to know that he has become very much furious with his wife because she has not remembered him since his death and provided any flower for him. He tells Eric to convey his message saying, "And ask her also if she remembers what day it is today. Has she forgotten ? Has she no memory ? In all these years, she has not remembered once" (172). He also blames the Huichol Indians to whom Dona Vera is keeping and serving.

Eric is very much tired of not finding the grave of his grandmother. Coming down the steps from the chapel, he went around to the back to see if there was an enclosure for the alien, separated and isolated from the rest. He saw a young woman descending. 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 and thyme" (175). 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. Eric could not imagine "why she acknowledged him or who she might be or why she was there" (175). She gave him a look out of the corner of her eyes and said, "And you - you're Paul, aren't you? I thought you might come" (176). Eric replied that he was Paul's son, Eric. She further said that "you are just like 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 came from somewhere else" (176). Eric admitted and said, "I think, I think they may have come from Spain- or somewhere" (176). She further said that Mexicans also had come from Asia. By pointing to the hill she had descended, she told him with a laugh, "It was the place where they buried everyone not of their faith" (177). After a while, she disappears. After the discussion with the ghost of his grandmother, Eric becomes more puzzled about his identity. Eric is not able to decide the origin of his ancestry.

The passage with which Desai ends the book suggests one interpretation of the relationship between past and present. Desai ends her novel with: "Below, in the town, the church bells began to ring. They rang and rang insistently, calling the dead back to their graves. The light grew brighter, the sun appeared, and everyone went streaming back to where they had come from" (179). Just who is 'everyone', who goes

'streaming' and from where did they come? These are unresolvable ambiguities. In their inscrutability, however, they suggest the possibility that Desai purposefully introduced them to lead the reader through the series of zigzags out of the mine she has constructed in the preceding pages. However, regardless of what we make of the meaning of the final line, it clearly serves to pull the book inside out and allows Desai to engulf her reader in a story of her and reader's mutual making that commands future reflection on pain of haunting. Thus, this magnificent ending directly offers the reader the opportunity to reunderstand and the premise of the book by following their own 'zigzag way' back into the mysterious place where we came from.

The Zigzag Way has received a wide range of criticism from different critics, where much of the focus has been placed on the issues of culture and immigrant's identity crisis. It is mainly a story of a boy who decides to make a journey to Mexico for his research on immigrants. Eric, a Harvard graduate student, goes to Mexico in search of his family past. Eric's visit to Mexico for the first time provides him new experience in a new place but that new place is associated with his family history.

Cynthia Dorfman states:

Desai shines when describing Mexico, bringing city and country, past and present vividly to life. Her slim novel brims with these descriptions, and with fascinating historical fact and detail. Which one might wish to know a bit more about inner lives of the book's character, its journey through Mexico's landscape is well worth taking.

(65)

Desai's novel is a compelling and moving document of the bleakest period of history. It forms part of a body of writing that confronts one of the darkest moments in the history of humanity, and with great courage reveals not only how humanity suffers

and inflicts upon itself untold damage but how it eventually repair itself and thus survives. This novel can be viewed as Eric's journey to explore his roots and family backgrounds. The entire narrative of the novel is structured on Eric's search of his family past, his memories, experiences and old association.

In this novel, Anita Desai illuminates Mexico's panorama and history and the intertwined lives of three different foreigners (Eric, Em and Dona Vera). Eric follows his lover, Em with no clear direction, arrives in an obscure mining town of Mexico, meets Dona Vera, an ethnographer. With the help of the lecture by Dona Vera on Huichol Indians, Eric recognizes some of the places she mentions: they are the places his Cornish grandfather described when he told him about his experiences in the silver mines of Mexico, where Eric's father Paul was born in the midst of Pancho Villa and Zapata's revolution. With vivid sympathy, Desai conjures the struggles of Eric's grandparents and their community. Linking with her own life, Desai uses the character, Eric who struggles for his self-discovery through his zigzag journey.

By writing on non-Indian themes, Desai follows in the recent footsteps of Rushdie and Vikram Seth, Critics might be tempted to seek hidden analogies between India and Mexico. Houghton Mifflin states, "Sensitive proof that understanding lies as much in the details in the broad strokes" (155). He further writes:

Between Eric's arrival in the town and his search for his grandmother's grave, Desai tells the story of how young Betty left Cornwall to marry Eric's grandfather Davey, adjusted to life in a Mexican village but died giving birth to Eric's father. Eric deeply affected, gives his vivid imagination free rein as a night in the cemetery becomes a transformative encounter with both the living and the dead. (156)

The protagonist, Eric is torn between past and present in the process of searching his authentic selfhood. He is forced to overcome the horror of separateness and of lostness and to find new forms by letting himself to the world so that he will be able

to feel at home. In an anxiety provoking situation, failure to achieve authentic past results in more and more discomfort. Michael Stone writes, "Eric is leaving behind a bright, open, exterior space that is devoid of human potential in order to enter a dark interior space in which a human past can be seen and touched" (4). Eric's struggle for the attainment of an authentic existence moves from a mistaken and confused awareness of identity to quite self-assertion of individuality. His struggle for self-identification leads to the transcendence of his self alienated plight. His search for his real identity remains in the state of confusion because he is only able to get the ghostly reality.

This dissertation has been divided into three chapters. The first chapter is the introductory part that presents a brief outline of the text to be researched. It also gives common understanding about text and author as well as simple elaboration of the hypothesis and the statements of the problem. Some personalities are brought to introduce text and author too. The text *The Zigzag Way* has been observed and analyzed minutely through the postcolonial perspective of identity, culture, Diaspora, sense of ambivalence sense of loss, mimicry etc. in second chapter of this research. In this chapter, many evidences have been taken from the text and theory to prove the hypothesis. This chapter focuses on Eric's journey of exploring his ancestry in the foreign land of Mexico where he feels being trapped in the cage of identity crisis. The third chapter is the conclusive chapter which consists of the brief wrapping of the whole-thesis. In the conclusion, there is a brief discussion about the cross-cultural conflict and self-alienation of one of the main characters, Eric, including others. Through the analytic study of different cultural background of different countries, characters, language etc. this research makes a conclusion which is based on the hyphenated self of an individual.

II. Cross-cultural Encounter: Hindrance in the Exploration of Self Identity

This research attempts to analyze Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* (2004), a haunting and luminous novel from the perspective of identity and its crisis. It mainly focuses on the issues of uncertain and zigzag journey by the main character Eric for searching his root. Through the analytical study of different characters, their way of living, language they used and the culture they lived, it tends to explore the social, historical background of different countries and societies that shape the characters' identities.

Desai, being one of Indian expatriate English novelists, has tried to explore both culture and character in this novel. Born to Bengali father and German mother, Desai does have the first hand experience of cross-cultural ethos. She has grown up writing and speaking English at school, German and Bengali at home and Hindi among friends. Because of her own hybrid upbringing, she has hybrid consciousness and such type of consciousness can be found in Eric, the main character of this novel. Eric's journey of research on immigrants is directly attached to his own ancestry. Eric's interest in identifying the grave of his grandmother, Betty, is lost somewhere in the wilderness with no tombstone in his voyage of self-discovery.

Cultural encounter facilitates a pattern of mutual adjustment and reciprocal give- and take by offering a space enough for coexistence and meaningful identity between cultures. When two or more cultures come together, the contestation/struggle takes place that matches the tensional relation between absence and presence, emptiness and affirmation because of the distinct cultural traits of the respected culture. The juxtaposition of two cultures i.e. alien and native culture generate a moment of self-transformation or the re-evaluation of prevailing patterns in the light of newly experienced insights of life. Cultural encounter is a process in which various

modes take place like interaction, acculturation, assimilation, adaptation, cultural and dialogical engagement etc.

The very cultural encounter can be seen in the love relationship between Eric and Em. Em doesn't accept Eric easily. Eric and Em are from different cultural backgrounds. Em is confused about Eric and his family. So, she wants to know about Eric's family past because "visits to Eric's family were always hasty, improvised, scrambled affairs, infrequent and rarely satisfactory" (15). Em, who is from a solid phalanx of doctors, dentists, optometrists and surgeons in Philadelphia and its environments, so her own choice of medical profession seems to be logical. But Eric is from such family background whose fortune was made in mine. As a result of their cultural difference, they have been moving in their own way and there is no clear indication about their engagement.

As Eric reaches Mexico, he finds the Mexican Environment quite unfamiliar and strange. There is a problem of adjustment for him. Eric finds himself "mysteriously receding and remaining elusive" (5). As a traveler, he is stranger for Mexican people. He finds difficulty in his visit to Mexico. He stays in an inn but he feels lonely there. It was a domestic scene but "Eric was not particularly drawn to domesticity" (7). It is because of cultural difference. Eric finds himself flushing too. He also continues his journey of exploration. During his journey, he feels his head, his brain, his mind come crashing down together. Describing Eric's experience in a foreign land of Mexico, Desai writes, "Bits and pieces, shared and shards, all cultured and confused and rattling as he throw himself on the bed. He lay against the red cushions under the white wool rug, and tried to steady the swinging of his mind" (11).

It is because of his encounter with strange society, culture, Eric gets tired and discomfort. Em had already told him that being an Americanist, "it might not prove

the right place of all because he had never been there before" (15). Em could not see "how her Mexico, and mosquitoes, could possibly provide him with ideas for a book on American immigration" (15).

Culture is based on the unique human capacity to classify, experience, encode such classifications symbolically and teach such abstractions to other. It is usually acquired through 'eculturation', the process through which an older generation induces and compels a younger generation to reproduce the established life styles. Thus culture is rooted in one's way of life. In Raymond Williams own words as he theorized in *Culture and Society*, "Culture is the way of living of people with the adjective whole implying an interval coherence that relegates dissension, conflict and incoherence to the exterior, the distance" (83). So, culture is never static, rather it is dynamic and changeable.

In her novel *The Zigzag Way*, each and every characters are bound to culture but their cultural background is different. The cultural difference determines the way of living. When there is no similarity in the way of living, there arises a conflict. In such a situation, a person searches for his ancestry to link himself/herself with the past. Eric, not having an opportunity to enjoy his present with full recognition of his family past, feels alienated and lonely. When he reaches Mexico, the feeling of alienation and loneliness surround him from all direction. He can't realize his legacy. He realizes that if he were to remain in Mexico, he would have been familiar with it. But he has been living in America. So, America is more familiar for him than Mexico. In Mexico, he is overwhelmed with sensory overload, but gradually seduced by the strangeness, the colour, the mysteries of an older world. Eric finds the whole environment of Mexico quite different from America. "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-rooted house with pink and orange and violet walls, pea-green taxis and leaf-green buses" (24). Eric falls in cultural dilemmas. On the one hand, he is not entirely happy to live in America and on the other hand he feels dislocated in the foreign land. "Mexico is just a fairy tale for him" (21). Eric can't decide where he belongs. His escape into the past is an afford to overcome his sense of loneliness and non-belongingness in a foreign land where his father was born.

In the context of globalization and post-colonialism, encounter of diverse cultural traits and complexities are modified because of the constant contact and cultural identities are becoming hybrid, in-between and multicultural. The political subject of decolonization is engendered by the encounter between conflicting system of belief. Anti-colonial identities do not owe their origin to a pure and stable essence, rather they are produced in response to the contingencies of treatment and disruptive breach in history and culture. The encounter between colonizer and colonized can be read as contact which requires a noble form of cross-cultural communication between speakers of different ideological/cultural language. As Bhabha writes:

The transmission of cultures of survival doesn't occur in the ordered 'musee imaginaire' of national cultures with their claims to the continuity of an authentic 'past' and living present-whether this scale of value is preserved into organicist 'national' traditions of romanticism or within the more universal proportions of classicism. (438)

In her novel *The Zigzag Way*, Desai brings forth the multicultural ethos. Eric, his father and grandfather do not have same cultural backgrounds. Eric is an American of Cornish origin. His father Paul has Mexican origin. Similarly, Eric's grandfather, being a Cornish, has spent most of the time in Mexico. So, he is more familiar with

Mexican culture. So, the background of Eric's ancestry is shaped in three different cultures. The another character, Dona Vera, who can be either a refugee from fascism or a Nazi supporter, is a native speaker of neither English nor Spanish and, according to some evil tongues, does not even speak the language of the Huichol Indians whom she serves. In Europe no one know about her Mexican life where as in Mexico she is not recognized as an European. So, "her story has many chapters: European, Mexican, Huichol . . ." (101). Eric, his ancestors and Vera all are displaced individuals, migrants with more than one identity and, to a greater or lesser extent, looking in integration with the Mexican surrounding described.

With the emergence of post-colonial criticism, culture has become very much vast entity. Such critics took culture to another level. They formulated their critical perspective on texts around the cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination. In the modern world order, it forces us to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value often composed incommensurable demands and practices produced in the act of social survival. As Bhabha writes:

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary post-colonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement. It is translational because such spatial histories of displacement-now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of 'global' media technologies- make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue. (438)

In *The Zigzag Way*, Desai includes the characters who have no linearity of their culture and life. The main character and his family life has an uneven cultural

development. Dona Vera's life also has no linearity in terms of culture. It is because of cultural displacement, Eric is unable to know about his ancestry. His father had not told him about his grandparents. As the conversation moves further between Eric and Em, Em teases him for not having sufficient information about his own parents and grandparents. Eric says, "When I told Dad we were going to Mexico, he told me something I hadn't known before-that he was born there. He'd never told me that" (21). Em again ridicules him saying, "But how strange, Eric not to know where your dad was born!" (21). Eric replies that his family is strange. His father was taken to England as an infant and brought up there. So, Eric's father was also quite unfamiliar with "Mexico and its mosquitoes" (15). The discussion between Eric and Em makes it clear that there is communication gap between Eric and his father.

Since Eric's father has not provided more information about his parents' life in Mexico, it is very difficult for him to explore his family history. The culture in which Eric, his parents and grandparents are raised, is not similar. Because of this cultural diversity, there arises cultural conflicts. Each and every culture contains the historical meaning and practices. When some culture tend to be superior, dominant and hegemonic, there arises the sense of counterculture.

The postcolonial situation is the situation of counterculture. The hegemony is questioned in postcolonial situation. During colonial period, the colonizers always dominate the colonized by obliging them to accept their culture. But the colonized people do not accept the culture of colonizers for a long time because they have their own culture which is in domination. When they try their best to save their culture, there arises cultural conflict and this conflict eventually turns into revolution. The Mexican revolution depicted in this novel is the result of same cultural conflict.

The ancestry of Eric, the main character is bound with the then socio-political and historical condition of Mexico. Throughout the history of Mexico, it has had many revolutions. The most famous revolutions perhaps is the Mexican Revolution from 1910 A.D to 1920 AD, against the dictator rule of President Porfirio Diaz, who ruled around thirty years in Mexico. Although Mexico achieved independence from Spain in 1810 A.D., there was not an abrupt change in the way the society demanded. So, the revolution was compulsory and it happened under the leadership of Emiliano Zapata in the south and Pancho Villa in the north. Zapata had once cleaned horse dung from floors of Carrara marble in President Diaz's stables, it was said and now led a troop of mounted Indians against the president's troops. As for Pancho Villa, he was never without a gun at all saying, "For me the war began when I was born" (135). They both become new heroes for new times.

During his exploration, Eric comes to know that his grandfather also had worked in the Silver mines of Mexico amidst that revolution, This revolution caused the miners' life uncertain and miserable. The Cornish miners become the substance of the guerilla war, some joining the rebels and other the federals. With frigid rumors and loot around, Davey and his wife Betty looked at the grimness around. Describing the result of revolution, Desai writes:

The pace of life once a steady jog through now seeming to race as if to a finish. Only no one thought about the finish because it was unthinkable. Something had been exposed the stupidity of their presence here and it was like a new rift open and raw, that had been suddenly revealed at their feet . . . The men, pulling on their boots, ran up the hill too, cursing at the shortage of firearms among them. Women were ordered to remain indoors and open the doors to none before daylight. (138)

During the period of revolution, a person has two options; either to surrender or to revolt. But it is very difficult to revolt against the government to those persons who are from foreign land. They do not know the whole social and cultural background of that country. They are geographically and culturally displaced individuals. When Davey loses his job as a miner because of revolution, he feels difficulty to sustain there because "the management of the mines had gone into a huddle" (139). Betty and Davey now feel an outcast within their own words. Davey sees Betty surrounded by panic-stricken women. Davey finds her "paler than he had ever seen her, biting her lips and drenched with perspiration" (141). When he touches her hand, she does not seem to see him, "her eyes were glazed with pain, her yellow hair tangled about her head" (141). It is because of the revolution, Betty's pregnant body is badly affected. Eventually, Betty loses her life only saving the infant.

Eric, while searching his identity and exploring the past, comes to know that identities are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere recovery of the past, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past. However, the dominant or superior culture enjoys the power to influence or dominate the others. Cultural identification is made within the discourse of history and culture. Identity doesn't move in linearity. It moves in zigzag way. Today identity is an issue of studying into the ethnic, class, gender, race, sexuality subcultures. Globalization has increased the rate of cultural amalgamation resulting into various forms of identity crisis.

The idea of otherness as an inner compulsion changes our conception of cultural identity. In this perspective, Stuart Hall writes, "Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some

universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental remark" (113). Thus identity is neither once- and for-all nor is a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return. It is something which has histories or past which continually speaks to us. Identities are constructed through memory, fantasy narrative and myth. Not an essence but a positioning where there is always politics of identity, a politics of position which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental law of origin.

Eric's haunting memory makes him to explore his origin or ancestry. His father Paul and grandfather Davey have their own life history to tell. During his exploration, Eric tries to know something about his parents and grandparents. He knows that his father could not realize the real affection of his mother because she died in childbirth. Paul's mother Betty's death not only made Davey's life miserable but also caused Paul's life in crisis. If la Bella Isadora had not taken the responsibility of bringing up the infant, Paul might have died untimely. When Davey married another wife after Paul's mother's death, Paul's life became miserable and he could not adjust with new family environment. Paul feels difficulty to live with them. Paul's stepmother "could not see Paul or his father as anything but agents of possible weakness and trouble" (151). So, Eric decides to search a job and earn his livelihood so that he will be able to get rid of his stepmother's grip. During his job search campaign, Paul happens to marry Madeleine. As the time passes, Madeleine delivers a child and he is christened as Eric.

It is because of different cultural upbringing, human behaviour also differs, cultural interact stem from the prolonged contact between two or more sets of values and norms which can be extremely different from one another and such contact may extend from domestic contacts to global interaction and between hegemonic western

culture and developing non-western societies. Cooperation and competition between cultures may result either in exchange and mutual support or hostility and conflict; from such cultural policy, cultural modification takes place which concerns the changes a cultural group to identities in collective as well as individual behavior in order to co-exist and interact with the norms and habits of dominant social system.

The characters included in *The Zigzag Way* share different cultural traits. Because of such cultural background, their habit and behavior are different to each other. Betty's death and Paul's birth shifts the narrative from one generation to another. Here Paul and Madeleine make next generation pair continuing the lineage of ancestry and add fresh perspectives to the trails of selfhood. In Madeleine's house, Paul found himself "engulfed by family in a way he had not ever experienced" (153). Paul found his married existence a complete escape from the loneliness he had known till then but was also often overcome by "the sheer numbers and noise and apt to fall silent and feel lost among them" (153). Paul, unlike his father is quiet, reticent and aloof to the world around. In terms of psychic interpretation, he can be labeled as a sensitive personality. He has no innate drive to reach any ideals and his attraction of life lies in accepting the anatomical and physiological aspects of life. He is beyond the cognitive setting of the life-world and stranger to the community he belongs. He is an easy sway between future-oriented and goal-directed motives and in this process, he accepts Madeleine with total non-chalance. His deficiency in the form of inefficient in signaling his symbolic universe is made meaningful through Madeleine, his wife. Eric, on the other hand, respects both human activities and consciousness and therefore much like his biological products. The structure his subjective consciousness shows innate relationship between man and society. He has a girlfriend Em, but it is not clear whether they will be engaged soon or not. Here, Eric, Davey,

Betty, Em and Madeleine believe that man does not have given relationship to the world. His structuring of subjective consciousness is his urge to establish relationship with it through biological ties or societal echoes.

During post-colonial situation, a person remains in the condition of 'in-betweenness'. It is 'in-between space' that carries the burden and meaning of culture which makes the notion of hybridity so important. It is frequently used in post-colonial discourse to mean simply cross-cultural 'exchange' and the idea of equal exchange. Hybridity can be understood by referring to Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence'. The 'ambivalence' in postcolonial discourse refers to the cultural crossover of various sorts emanating from the encounter between colonizer and colonized, alien and native. It is the mixture of both parties where second one act in the consent of first one. The colonized adopts the colonizer's culture, language and values thinking that it is superior. The mimic man never become pure white man, and what they mimic appears also as mockery or parody. As Bhabha writes, The menace of mimicry is its double mission which is disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object" (88).

In *The Zigzag Way*, Desai's characters are torn in such a condition that they feel living nowhere. They have hybrid consciousness. Eric being an American of Cornish origin, finds himself "flushing too, with annoyance in the foreign land of Mexico" (9). Eric's search for his ancestry is quite different task because no one in his family had told him about their own lives: where they lived or how, what they worked at, where they had been or what they planned to do" (17-18).

Memory plays a vital role in human life. Memory makes a man both to suffer and appear happy. Nietzsche has stated in his initial remark that the unhistorical and

historical sense is equally necessary for the health of an individual, people and culture. One should be able to forget or remember at the right time. If a man forgets all things about the past, he becomes like a beast. Man becomes a man only when he overcomes the beastly state of living in the narrowness of horizon. He also points out that there are two types of people- the first incapable of forgetting and reshaping themselves out of the past, and the second group forgetting the past too quickly, and easily severed from the past. According to Nietzsche, both these two poles are bad. In this connection, he forwards another historical standpoint-superhistorical standpoint. He says that the progress of any man, any society and culture depends on this standpoint. Similarly Homi K. Bhabha announces that memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous for the question of cultural identity. Remembering, he writes, "is never a quite act of introspection or retrospection. It is painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of trauma of the present" (63). In this manner, both Nietzsche and Bhabha focus on partial memory and partial forgetting. There should be a balance between remembering and forgetting.

The Zigzag Way captures the sense of both historical and unhistorical sense. But there is no balance between them. Eric's journey and his research process on immigrants itself is his process of remembering and returning back to the past to search his ancestry. Eric's attempt of searching his ancestry from the beginning to the end suggests that a man is always haunted by the past. While returning to the past, he is careless about his present condition. The work of exploring the past is not an easy task for him. It is risky too. Eric has to face ups and down in this process of exploring his ancestry.

Eric is haunted by a kind of fear, doubt and guilt. He finds himself distracted by everything in the airport. He finds the environment of Mexico quite different from Boston, Massachusetts. This dissimilarity is revealed by the character Eric as he says:

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 hall which was swamped by more people with black 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. (24)

The things which Eric sees in Mexico and America have a vast gap. So, he requires "serious attention and measured opinion to know the fact because he had not known those things before" (25). For Eric, Mexico is like "Ali Baba's cave of curiosities" (29). To drench his thirst of curiosities, Eric encounters with many people and asks with them about the history of Mexico. After some conversation, he comes to know that in Mexico all foreigners took to "dressing flamboyantly in vivid blues and scarlet with heavy embroidery and broad belts and to wearing a great deal of elaborate jewellery" (29). As a foreigner, Eric is not able to cope with the Mexican people and its history.

The Zigzag Way is a portrait of loneliness, of alienation and immigrant's existential problems. Eric and Dona Vera both try to assimilate with the Mexican way of life and makes sincere efforts to develop a sense of belongingness, yet they are marginalized and repudiated. While lecturing on the Huichol Indians Dona Vera uses the "mixture of several languages and vocabularies which Eric can't understand. Eric regrets his minimal acquaintance with the language" (31). The pronounced accent she brought to it caused further confusion. Everything becomes strange for him because

he has come there from foreign land. He is unable to know Dona Vera's real identity because Eric feels himself "stumbling into a rabbit hole because of the welter of strange words strange names churning around him" (31). Eric had never gone back to his father's English home or seen his grandparents. The discussion with Dona Vera somehow helps him for his self-discovery.

The socio-political situation of Mexico leaves an impact on Eric's mind that ultimately affects his acculturation process. Eric knows the misery and bitterness caused by political upheavals in Mexico which damaged Mexican miner's life. During his process of exploration Eric understands the miserable condition of Mexican miners. He also comes to know that his grandfather was also the same miner in the same mines of Mexico having the same fate. His grandfather's job as a miner is disturbed by the revolution which eventually throws him in a whirlpool of isolation. He has to lose his wife due to the impact of revolution. Describing the bad impact of revolution on Davey's wife, Desai writes, "The sound of its wheels on cobblestones ground with an iron sound that seemed to lament the harshness of Betty's fate" (143). Other miners also mourn on Betty's death. But the rulers and the mine owners show their indifference about the miserable condition of the miners. Eric's grandfather finds himself trapped in an unhappy situation because of the untimely demise of his wife. He feels like an insignificant outsiders. For him everything seems diminished. So he seemed "not to know what to do or where to go next and stood staring at the empty street as if waiting for it do feel with people again" (144). In such difficult situation, Eric's grandfather decides to go to Cornwall where he may realize consolation and safety. At the railway station, Cornish families met him and at seeing the pathetic condition of Davey and Betty's child, "women held their handkerchief to their mouths

in shock, men found no words to speak to the bereaved father "(145). They express their sympathy to Davey and his family.

The sense of humanity and pity can be found in La Bella Isadora, Hammers family and Betty's sisters who take the responsibility of upbringing Davey's child. Betty's sisters Gertie and Sarah committed to "remaining unmarried and raising the child" (149). Describing the benevolent sense of Betty's family, Desai writes, "The air of self-sacrifice and duty was as palpable in their house as the bleakness of the surrounding quarries, the nearby red-brick chapel and the need to economize on food and coal fires in a household with no income but what the child's father was able to send them" (149).

After getting the entire information about the Mexican Revolution and its impact on miners, Eric knows that his grandfather and father had no more pleasurable past. In terms of their past, there was uncertainty and zigzag motion. After knowing such condition of his grandfather and father, Eric decides to have further exploration which can help him to link his present with the past.

A self standing in the post-colonial situation is always haunted by the past. The haunting memory of the past generates a sense of belongingness. When one feels difficulty to associate himself with his ancestors, he or she becomes ready for a journey to search his subjectivity. As Leela Gandhi writes, "Postcolonial novel finds its provenance in the small pleasures of subjectivity, its content is almost entirely shaped by personal journey, attachments, memories, losses" (164). When a person is detached from his own culture, society as well as family, he seeks attachments. To fulfill this purpose, they move towards the past situation of his family. Desai has become capable of descending into the past in this novel. Her masterful attempt of indulging into the past is worth mentioning which can be proved from the abstract and

ironic epigraph of the book's first chapter. In this epigraph she mentions, "The ancient Chinese believed time is not ladder one ascends into the future but a ladder one descends into the past" (1). This epigraph indicates that past is very important and one has to remember the past to know their present condition. So, the base of the present and the future is the past. One can not escape from it. If a person tries to escape from his own past, his present and future remain incomplete.

After examining the book's first mention of motion into the past, the next logical scene to explore is Eric's first sudden descend into the past, which begins on page 27. Eric's attention is snagged in the midst of Dona Vera's otherwise incomprehensible lecture by the names of the mines in which his grandfather Davey worked and which were buried in this mind like flakes or golden nonsense waiting to be unearthed. Describing the experience like that of stumbling into a rabbit hole, the narrator relates how Eric is forced to plumb the depths of his memories to understand his connection to the mines. Eventually, he decides to act on his new-found recognition of the names of the mines by looking them up on a map so that he may try to unearth the connections, burrow through tunnel back into the old country to the old man, thus creating a tentative plan to look further back into the past by means of established historical documentation.

Anita Desai's characters in *The Zigzag Way* do not have fixed identity and ambition. They are not able to decide clearly about their plan. Eric, the main character, though he plans to go to Mexico for his research on American immigrants but his plan modifies into another direction. After reaching Mexico and by getting some indication about his grandparents, he begins his quest for self- discovery. But he is not able to get an absolute knowledge about his grandparents. His encounter with his grandmother's ghost somehow provides him of little information about his

grandparents and parents. The information provided by his grandmother's ghost makes him more confused about his family history.

In Mexico, Eric is trapped in the feeling of estrangement and isolation, and persisting sense of alienation. He finds himself as a stranger and a wanderer both externally and internally. Eric's individuation remains, however, only potential when he is linguistically and culturally different from other native people. He finds himself "mysteriously receding and remaining elusive" (5). He had almost ceased to believe the town existed, that it was anything more than a legend, this ghost town of the sierra. Eric struggles hard to be familiar with unfamiliar environment in foreign land because he had known that it was not easy to accomplish his grand mission.

Anita Desai shows the problem of diasporic individual in *The Zigzag Way*. Those diasporic individuals neither can fully accept the foreign culture nor forget the native culture. People in the diasporic situation have access to a second tradition quite apart from their own racial history. This kind of situation generates a sense of hybridity. Hybridity is an expression of everyday life in the post-imperial era. The term has something to do with the traumatic colonial expression since it is the 'ambivalent' relationship of the colonizer and the colonized. The colonial settlers, once they arrived in an alien land, they felt the necessity of establishing new identity since they were displaced from their own point of origin. In a colonized society, there emerged a binary relationship between the people of two cultures, races and languages and such relation produced a hybrid or cross-cultural society.

Hybridity at best can be understood by referring to Bhabha's notion of 'ambivalence'. For Bhabha, it is the cultural cross-over of various sorts emanating from the encounter between colonizer and the colonized. Ambivalence is the mixture of the colonizer and the colonized, where colonized people work in the consent of the

colonizer. Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have defined ambivalence along Bhabha's line as "it describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simple and completely opposed to the colonizer "(12). Hybrid cultures do exist in colonial society where people occupy an 'in-between' space by the mimicry of the colonizer. Mimicry reveals the limitation in the authority of colonial discourse almost as though colonial authority inevitably embodies the seeds of its own destruction. The consequences of this for postcolonial studies are quite profound for what emerges through the flow in colonial power is writing that is postcolonial writing, the ambivalence of which is meaning to colonial authority. The menace of mimicry does not lie in its concealment of some real identity behind its mask, but comes from its double vision which discloses the ambivalence of colonial discourse and also disrupts its authority. Bhabha further writes, "Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriately however, a difference or recalcitrance, which cohere the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both normalized knowledge and disciplinary powers" (86).

The inappropriately objects of colonial chain of command are also inappropriately colonial subjects because what is being set in their behavior is something that may ultimately be beyond the control of colonial authority. This inappropriateness disrupts the normality of the dominant discourse itself.

Mexico was under the colonial rules of Spain upto 1810. So, the colonial hegemony still remained there though it achieved independence. After independence also, people could not easily adjust with new environment because they were habituated with colonial rule which was different from the recently independent country. Again, there occurred a revolution which badly affected the day to day life of

miners. During revolution, people were divided into two groups; some supporting colonial rule and some discarding it. In the course of his research, Eric knows that his grandfather was also the victim of the same revolution. His grandfather had been living there and doing his job as miner in the silver mines: "Davey had set off work in the silver mines of Mexico like so many other who had lost their jobs when the tin mines went out of business" (116). Davey was from Cornwall, England. In fact, he had gone to Mexico after losing his job as a miner in Cornwall. As a foreign miner, he felt alienated and dislocated there. He could not sustain his life because Mexico at that time was in very bad situation because of the revolution. He tried to assimilate with the new and strange culture but he could not do so. Before having engaged with Betty, Davey remembers his home and says, "I will think all of you at home in Cornwall and in my heart I will be with you even if I am here in Mexico" (118-119). Before marriage, both Davey and Betty travelled many places of Mexico which were very different from Cornwall.

Desai has tried to show the problem of assimilation in *The Zigzag Way*. Assimilation or adaptation is the process whereby individuals or groups once dissimilar become similar, share the same sentiments, values and goals and developed into a unified group. It results because of the functional relation of the diverse cultural elements. Assimilation, as Fred Dallmayr quotes Robert Park and Ernest Burgess "is a process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated by them in a common cultural life" (14).

Assimilation is closely affiliated to the process of acculturation. Within the acculturating group, individuals lose their ties with the original cultural background

and acquire values, habits and behaviours from the dominant culture. During the process of assimilation, large numbers of immigrants from many parts of the world are progressively integrated into dominant social and political fabric. Assimilation is a kind of cultural borrowing which is a continuous process characterized by the fusion and adjustment of various cultural traits. This is to say that the assimilating groups while acquiring new cultural values or making adjustment with the alien cultural milieu, still maintains as indigenous solidarity.

Thus, cultural difference never becomes 'complete' and 'univocal' because it moves in symbolic formation from one enunciatory position to another leaving it further open to cultural translation. Any demand for the full representation of cultural difference is bound to lead to the loss of meaning because it involves interdisciplinarity and the emergent cultural forms can't be contextualized in terms of some pre-given or already existing frame of reference.

Eric and Dona Vera face a problem of assimilation in this novel. Dona Vera, though she has been regarded as "Queen of the Sierra" (77), she lacks her real identity. Dona Vera's act of serving the Huichol Indians is her assimilation process in the new land. She has her own library which contains several books related with the social, political, economic and historical condition of Mexico. Eric reads a political essay from Dona Vera's library which includes the key word of the book's title '*Zigzag*'. Eric reads the book as:

The Indian tenateros, the beasts of burden in the mines of Mexico, remain loaded with a weight of 275 to 300 pounds for a span of six hours. The tenateros carry the minerals in bags made of the thread of pite. To protect their shoulders they place a woolen covering under this bag. In ascending the stairs they throw their bodies forwards and rest

on a staff. 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. (79)

After reading this political essay, Eric comes to know the situation of foreign miners in Mexican mines. The foreign miners including Indians and Cornish were destined to work in high temperatures. They used to carry heavy loads of minerals. He realizes the pathetic situation of his grandfather and other Indian miners. Eric imagines that "was the world his grandfather had found when he crossed the ocean and sought out new territory where he might stake his plan" (79). This essay changed his mentality and he determined to explore the past with enthusiasm. But he also faces the problem of assimilation there. He finds difficulty to search his ancestry in the foreign land.

In postcolonial situation, a self doesn't realize as one. People have fragmented or hyphenated self. An individual's 'self' is evaluated in comparison to 'other'. In considering the role of other in defining the self, the issue of cultural identity moves far beyond one's own national borders and that, in fact, national cultures assume their form on the borders of other influential cultures. Anita Desai's novel *The Zigzag Way* begins on the fragmentation of the self- an unreasonable self living with a reasonable intent. Eric, when he realizes that he is degraded, he moves further to explore his past. His research process is the act of linking himself with his ancestry so that he can feel as one. Eric thinks that his story "was not an uncommon story" (9). Each stranger, each traveler needs to think his story unique. Dona Vera who lives in the Hacienda de la soledad has her own story to tell. She is not also fully satisfied with the situation where she lives and whom she serves. In all her European years, she had never had solitude or space. Her husband Don Roderigo was careless and indifferent towards

her: "No one in Roderigo's family or circle could know how she had lived" (66). Dona Vera's life in Mexico is miserable one. She thinks herself as "an outsider, a foreigner presenting an opening to a foreign world" (67). She sees the bad condition of the Hacienda de la soledad. She had herself driven up the mountain and followed streets "silenced by white dust and lined with doorless, windowless and often roofless houses in which lizards hid among weeds" (68). Except for a few abandoned excavations and ruined entrances to shafts and tunnels, there was none. Describing the situation of Hacienda de la soledad, Desai writes:

The silence was so intense that she could hear the wings of the zopilotes circling watchfully above on currents of air, she had to imagine the sounds the mountain must once have contained—explosions of dynamite, small avalanches of gravel followed by the thunder of falling boulders, the rumble of metal trolleys along rusty tracks, jackhammers, whistles and sirens. (68)

With the pace of time, Dona Vera encounters with the Huichol Indians who politely returned her greeting but "they did not pause or show the slightest interest in her foreign presence" (71). She could not make out who they might be: she could see their dress and appearance that they were not local people who were all farmers or herders. Now, Dona Vera is "aroused by the aloofness and self-containment of the Huichol" (72). Dona Vera is a contradictory character. She is herself in pitiable condition but she shows her pity towards the Huichol Indians.

Eric is impulsive and undecided character. He lingers in conversation and meetings that add nothing to the sense of direction he is supposedly trying to work up under the steady influence of his girlfriend, Em. Eric and Em are contrasts in human nature; the first stands for disorder, the latter implies order and a kind of placid

well being. Em goes after what she wants whereas Eric is taken over by sensed, seen and experienced longings and epiphany moments. Mexico inspires Eric very much. Here in the heat, the dense colour, the haze of unreality that hangs over everything, an old memory comes to him of his grandfather who worked, like thousands of other Cornish men in the famed gold mines of Mexico. The decision to go in search of this ghost town with only the ghost of memory for clue and map is an inevitable one.

Eric discovers many things about Mexico, about himself, about his relationship with Em. He also discovers what he had always felt to be real. He is overwhelmed by the great wind of intangible truth of the past. This wind steers Eric through time till the past touches him and bridges the continents of his selfhood, showing him that the mystical core of Mexico is this very same truth.

Desai has used flashback technique by which the past incidents are elaborated. These incidents become the backdrops of the present condition of Eric's life. Through flashback technique, Desai tells the history of Eric's parents and grandparents. Desai's use of flashback technique is very important in this novel because the overall theme of this novel is revealed through this flashback technique. Dona Vera's escape from Nazi Germany to Mexico in search of a safe refuge leaves her bitter and completely disillusioned, as it was like a jump from one hell to another. Similarly, Eric's attempt of establishing keen relationship with the people living in Mexico becomes futile. By telling the story of Eric and Dona Vera, Anita Desai suggests that a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of life means the genuine attempt of the individual to establish human relationship with other individuals and through them with community and humanity; a multicultural perspective that widens and enlarges the frontiers of thought, an important literary characteristics.

In *The Zigzag Way*, Anita Desai tries to reveal the identity of different characters who are migrants. Identity is a term that tends to denote who or what an individual, social, cultural, ethical as well as spiritual and existential aspects of human value is. Every identity is constituted by representation. It is a 'production' which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside representation. Stuart Hall argues that there are at least two different ways to thinking about 'cultural identity'. The first position defines 'cultural identity in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, as Hall argues, "Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provides us, as one people, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (111). One can't speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity, without acknowledging its other side. Such is the second notion of cultural identity for Hall. Hall argues:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (112)

Eric's journey is the journey of searching his identity which has a root with Mexican and Cornish and American culture. So, his journey for exploration is his homeward movement. Similarly, Dona Vera, though she herself is in identity crisis, works to save the identity of Huichol Indians who have their little pining lives. The Huichol

Indians were badly suppressed in Mexico by their owners. They had 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" (85). The mines where they worked were dark inside. Only tallow candles were allowed there. They thus moved upward with their burden, the trunk being slightly inclined and secured by props every fifteen feet, the abyss on either side into which a false step precipitates them: "Indians have been known to carry up from five hundredweight in this manner, in leather sacks" (85). After knowing such miserable condition of the Huichol Indians, Eric starts thinking by relating it with his grandfather because he is informed that his grandfather had once worked in the same mines of Mexico. Eric imagines, "Surely he could not have labored as the Indians did" (85). The identity of Dona Vera, Eric and Huichol Indians have their historicity and undergo constant transformation because identity is never static.

Far from being externally fixed in some essentialized past, identities are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past. However, the superior or dominant culture enjoys the power to influence or dominate others. Cultural identity is the point of identification or future which is made within the discourse of history and culture. Today identity is an issue of studying into the ethnic, class, gender, race, sexuality and subcultures. Globalization had increased the rate of cultural amalgamation resulting into various forms of identity crisis.

It is necessary to examine socio-cultural backgrounds, politics, economy, human development, growth and psychology of an individual or group in the postcolonial or third world countries to get into the core of human civilization: the

identity of multiple factors becomes a debate to analyze life styles of peoples, cultures politics, economy hybridity, societies, myths, spiritualism and many more, which determine the paradigm of 'self' and 'other'. In the context of post colonialism lines of communication and exchange within contemporary world cultures are now fragmented, widened, interwoven, globally dispersed and complexly intertwined. This has inevitable consequences for nation formation, and even they in which population conceive the idea of 'home' and indigenous values and identity. As Vijay Mishra puts it, "Home now signals a shift away from homogenous nation-states based on an ideology of a simulation to a much more fluid and complex definition of nations as a multiplicity of diasporic identities" (7).

Indian-born English novelist Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* serves as a glaring example of searching for postcolonial identity or self of Mexico after its independence from Spain, reflecting postmodern dimensions of human civilization. This is the main problem for identity search to study in the text that is woven in *The Zigzag Way*. The central character and his consciousness often takes on the significance of collective awareness. Because of this sense of collective awareness, Eric does not hesitate to ask questions with many people about the situation of Cornish miners in Mexico. From the beginning to the end, he is not tired of his exploration. But he is not fully satisfied with his work because he is not able to obtain the absolute knowledge about his ancestry.

In the final part of the novel, Desai briefly describes the *Día de los Muertos*, the feast day when the locals celebrate and remember their dead. Eric's curiosity moves towards that festival. So, he goes there and tries to find his grandmother's tombstone but he hardly recognizes it. Eric joins the procession of people, family, groups mostly, out of the plaza and into the dirt road that wound uphill past house of

adobe and tile that were clearly abandoned and in ruins, doors hanging from their hinges, "barred windows opening on to scenes of fallen walls, painted plaster turned to flakes of dust, cacti and convolvuli where floors had been" (161). When Eric sees such condition of the houses, he thinks that "these were the houses where the Cornish miners had once lived" (161). He sees people passing through it with the sheaves of flowers, baskets of food and drink, bundles of candles and pots of copal, blankets and children. The families who had already arrived were "washing and scrubbing what tombstones there were, straightening the crosses that were listing to one side, filling rusty cans with water from a tap for the fresh flowers they had brought" (162) But Eric can't decide what to do and what not to do because he has not known about his grandmother's grave. So, he is "standing there with a sheaf of flowers in his hands" (162). All the people whom he met were unknown and strange to him. It was his first visit. So the truth was that "he had no idea where she might be buried" (163).

A stranger in a foreign land when he faces obstacles in his mission, starts questioning about himself. This questioning is connected with his own self or identity. Under ordinary conditions, individuals tend to take their self-definition or identity for granted; they sense no actual problem until their familial, social, cultural communal, economic, socio-political, moral, intellectual, indigenous and such other positions are on threat. Identity becomes an issue when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. Identities are not something fixed and for all rather they are constantly producing themselves a new. Identity is associated with desire-desire for recognition, association, protection over time and in space. Identities are constructed under circumstance which are not chosen deliberately. An identity crisis is a feeling of being unsure about who or what we are. It is a condition of hyphenated self. Crisis in identity results from the sense of

belongingness to a specific time and space. Because of globalization process set in motion by the technologically advanced West, the notion of identity is understood as hybrid rather than fixed, a cultural representation rather than autonomous, marginal and diasporic, rather than central or metropolitan. The post-colonial civilizations are almost stripped of what many people or communities now call question about one's meaning, value and position are faced with ontological questions. The defining base of the individual or collective identity-social, political, mythological, spiritual, cultural and the like-have been eroding themselves in the individual or the collective consciousness, thus making more confused, disillusioned, anxious, agonized and even vulnerable to the threats of the dangers known to one and as well as the unknown. In such situation, there lies identity crisis.

Anita Desai seems to be successful in the sensitive portrayal of the inner life of different characters in the novel *The Zigzag Way*. The novel is not only the story of Eric's family but it is also the brilliant evocative travelogue of Mexico. The central Character, Eric fails to unify himself with his ancestry in the course of his journey. During his visit to celebrate the festival 'Dia de los Muertos', Eric encounters a man who says, "So, there she lies alone, and she was always afraid of that" (165). He further says that "her father gave her to me when she was fifteen years old" (165). The man also indicates her death. Eric wants further discussion with the stranger. Eric asked him whether she had died of an illness or an accident. The man replied, "She gave birth her last act" ((166). Now, Eric tries to link the old man's remark with his father's life because his father had the same destiny. In fact the man was his grandfather's ghost but he did not tell the detail information about his family. Eric, beginning to feel the chill of the darkened hill-side, watched the figures that rose up and sank down like the shadows cast by and wondered "if any of them might tell him

something of his grandparents' time" (167). He read the inscriptions and names on the stones. While reading, he found the name of the family into which Dona Vera had married. Soon after Dona Vera's husband Don Roderigo's ghost appeared and told Eric to carry his message to Dona Vera saying, "And those poor intoxicated indios she keeps-tell her tell her, if she wants to be queen, she should have chosen better subjects!" (173). He further said, "Tell her, ask her it pursued him, when the time comes, where does she think they will bring her? It will be here with me beside her and around as all the indios she could wish!" (173). Through the interaction with Don Roderigo's ghost, Eric comes to know that Dona Vera has not remembered her husband after his death. She has not offered any flowers for him in the festival *Dia de los Muertos*. It indicates that there was not sound relationship between Dona Vera and her husband. Such kind of relationship puts a question in Dona Vera's identity.

Desai ends her novel *The Zigzag Way* with Eric's encounter with his grandmothers' ghost. Eric is not satisfied with the discussion with his grandmother's ghost because it doesn't provide him the sufficient information for his self discovery. Eric's grandmother's ghost shows him only "a small bunch of grey heaves and pale flowers" (175), which indicates that nobody in her family has remembered her for a long time and offered her a bunch of fresh flowers and green leaves. The identity of Mexican and Cornish is revealed in the course of their discussion. It is revealed that Cornish are not English but they are from Spain. She further says, "Like Mexicans, they came from Asia, across the -the-" (176) Now, Eric is so puzzled that he is not able to decide where he belongs. This situation of Eric associates Bhabha's notion of culture. According to Bhabha cultures and identities are never unitary in themselves, not simply dualistic in the relation of self enunciation is crossed by the difference of writing. Bhabha further writes:

The pact of interpretation is never just an act of communication between two interlocutors; these two 'places' must pass through a 'Third Space; which represents both the general condition of language and the specific implication of the utterance. This Third space, 'though unrepresentable in itself' makes meaning and reference an ambivalent process which challenges 'our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force authenticated by the originary past kept alive in the national tradition of the people'. We must recognize then the 'hybridity' of all cultural statements. (36-38).

Anita Desais *The Zigzag Way* is an amalgamation of different cultural traits. This novel is liberally sprinkled with Spanish and Mexican words and phrases like *Alla Arriba*, *Zopliote*, *Barranco* etc. but it is not clear from the internal evidence how far her grasp of spoken and written Spanish and Mexican actually extends. Being an Indian-born writer, she has not used any Indian characters in this novel. The setting of this novel is outside India. It is set in Mexico with flashback to the US (New England, Harvard and Maine Fishing Village) and England (Cornwall). So, there lies a question of authenticity.

During his research campaign, Eric finds that he himself and other family members have been trapped in the cage of hybridity and ambivalent space. It becomes very difficult to find his actual identity. Eric's visit to his family ends in uncertainty. Therefore, one can say that Eric is an embodiment of societal self externalization through objective reality in the form of ritualistic mode of honoring the deads.

III. Eric's Sense of Ambivalence and Failure of Reconciliation

In *The Zigzag Way*, Desai combines the theme of cross-cultural conflict and self-alienation in the postcolonial scenario. In this novel, most of the protagonists are alienated from society, families, parents and from their own culture because they are not average people but individuals who are unable to communicate and to identify themselves with the people around. It is their sense of alienation and a haunting past that motivates them in their quest for identity, for a meaningful present. So, Desai's expatriate sensibility has been in *The Zigzag Way* which can be analyzed with an elaborate study of the main character, Eric's journey for self discovery . The primary focus of this research is also based on the same journey of Eric for his self-discovery.

In *The Zigzag Way*, Desai brings forth the multicultural ethos to reveal the complex negotiation between culture and identity. The setting of the novel is Mexico with flashbacks to the US (New England-Harvard and a Maine fishing Village) and England (Cornwall). These all places have close link with Eric and his family. Eric, a young researcher and author of a thesis on immigration patterns, is an American of Cornish origin whose grandfather, Davey Rowse, emigrates to Mexico, does his job as a miner in the silver mines and marries Betty Jennings. He is badly affected by Mexican Revolution. Because of this revolution, he has to lose his job as well as his wife. It is due to the impact of revolution, his wife dies in child birth saving only the infant. As soon as his wife's death, Davey returns to Cornwall and after sometime he marries another wife. There is uncertainty in the life of Eric's grandfather and father as well. This uncertain life of his grandparents and parents makes Eric to have the same fate. Eric, though unknown about his grandparents, determines to complete his quest motif. In the sense of the same quest-motif, there lies the struggle for self-discovery. His struggle for self-discovery ends in ghostly reality.

Eric, caught in the process of cultural mediation, searches for a meaningful identity. Identity for Eric is associated with the desire-desire for recognition, safety, security, and above all to live. Identity is perceived and discussed not as 'central' or once and for all but as essentially 'hybrid and representational.' On the basis of the characters' inclination to create group solidarity in a hostile milieu, the issue of identity, at times is treated by relating it to the notion of diaspora.

None of the protagonists used in the novel are Mexican though the novel is set in Mexico. The novel is about Europeans and Americans losing, finding or seeking roots in the alien environment of Mexico. Eric speaks little Spanish, while Dona Vera, who could be either a refugee from fascism or a Nazi supporter, is a native speaker of neither English nor Spanish. She doesn't even speak the language of the Huichol Indians whom she serves. Dona Vera has no fixed identity in terms of language and culture Eric, his ancestors and Vera are all displaced individuals, migrants with more than one identity and to a greater or lesser extent, lacking in integration with the Mexican surroundings described. Eric hardly realizes the sense of belongingness rather he remains in 'in-between' space. Having 'in-between' space is the condition of not having certain and fixed identity. When there is no fixed identity, there lies identity crisis of a person. Eric and Dona Vera both suffer from the problem of identity crisis.

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