

Home and the World: The Cornish Migration and Displacement of Huichol in Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*

- Navin Kumar Yadav

Abstract: *The Zigzag Way*, published in 2004, is a haunting exploration of human life and history. Set in Mexico, the novel is about a young American's search for his genealogical roots. It's a journey backward to enter into past as Desai rightly points out in the very beginning of the novel that "the ancient Chinese believed that time is not a ladder ascends into future but a ladder one descends into the past" (*The Zigzag Way*1). It's about Eric's zigzag voyage into Mexico's mining history and the history of his own family.

Keywords: Migration, displacement, diaspora.

Introduction: Writing about the novel, Abraham Verghese states that the novel is a story of a young American, Eric, seeking to learn more about his grandfather, who he knows made an improbable journey from Cornwall, England to the silver mines of Mexico, is the means by which Desai approaches Mexico, not to understand it (because Mexico is beyond understanding, most of all its own citizens), but to lay out its conflicting parts: the politics of identity, the irony of its warring selves, its stark physical beauty, its mingling of the secular and spiritual into quotidian rituals, the bastardizing and deboning of indigenous culture to leave a hollow shell, and the parallel parody of a class posturing as European, claiming a Europe that disowned it long ago. (*The Zigzag Way* viii-ix) In other words, the novel is a fictional history of Mexico in brief-narrating the history of Mexico's silver mines. Anita Desai lived extensively in Mexico and the urge to write this part of her experience gave birth to this novel. Telling Mellisa Denese why she chose to wrote about Mexico, Desai herself states that "It's such an ancient country, you feel every stone has a history to tell. Mexico and India share a history of colonialism - 300 years of Spanish and British rule - along with this much, much longer past that goes back into myth. Physically, we're alike, too: I am constantly taken for a Mexican" ("Out of India"). In the novel, there are three stories interwoven-of Eric, an American academician who visits Mexico with his girlfriend Em; Of Dona Vera, an Austrian woman who happened to have a dubious European past and who married a rich Mexican and thus lands into Mexico; and of Betty Jennings, Eric's grandmother, who had come to Mexico to marry a Cornish miner and died during giving birth to a child. The novel beings when Eric, a young aspiring writer, arrives in Mexico with his girlfriend Em, who had come to pursue her specialized and technical academic research into "the field." Eric has hoped that his visit to Mexico would help him coming across some fresh ideas:

I might come across—um, something in Mexico that would put me on

the right track,' he said in what hoped was a confident tone.

'Or not. You don't know Mexico, you've never been there, it might not prove the right place at all. You're an Americanist after all.' Em could not see how her Mexico, and its mosquitoes, could possibly provide him with ideas for a book on American immigration. (*The Zigzag Way*15)

But it is not only his book that has brought Eric to Mexico. With Mexico, he has another important connection that his father was born there. He tells Em:

'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.'

'But how strange, Eric—not to *know* where your dad was born!'

'Well, you know my family is strange. You've always said that,' he teased her. 'But as strange as that! I never guessed. Why *hadn't* he told you before? I suppose because he doesn't remember a thing about it. He was taken to England as an infant and brought up there. Mexico is just a fairy tale to him.' (*The Zigzag Way*21)

Thus Eric's desire to know his family past brings him to Mexico. Eric has come here not only to see the mountains of Mexico but also to find his roots. He tells his girlfriend Em that his grandfather was a miner in Mexico, and he knows nothing more than this that his father was born here in Mexico. Em is exasperated to know that Eric knew nothing about his own grandfather:

'Well, if it's true that your grandfather was a miner in Mexico once you surely couldn't have forgotten that, could you?' She asked ... 'But surely you'd have heard your Dad *speaking* of his father? Didn't he say anything the time he told you he was *born* in Mexico?' (*The Zigzag Way*29)

Eric has met his grandparents only few times. Even when they died, his father went alone to attend their funeral in Cornwall. His father rarely spoke about his parents because:

He 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 had of emigration and a new beginning in a New World. (*The Zigzag Way*34) Thus Eric's arrival in Mexico is to find out more about his genealogy. Eric desires to reopen the closed attic of his father in order to know about his own family and also about the Cornish Diaspora in Mexico. Here in Mexico, Eric meets Dona Vera who had happened to have married a rich Mexican miner, Don Roderigi, and is now known as "Queen of the Sierra." Eric casually comes across a notice about "a lecture to be given by a woman with a Teutonic name, on the Huichol Indians and their belief in the powers of the cactus" (*The Zigzag Way*29). The Huicholare indigenous people of Mexico, living in the Sierra Madre Occidental range in the Mexican states of Nayarit, Jalisco, Zacatecas, and Durango. Though Dona Vera was supposed to speak about beliefs and customs of Huichol but she prefers to speak about the devastating effects of industrialization on the community:

She explained why she chose today not to speak of the Huichol beliefs and customs but instead of the industry that destroyed their habitat and

made it difficult to continue their traditions such as the pilgrimage and the hunt for peyote. (*The ZigzagWay*36)

Eric informs Dona Vera that his grandfather had also come to Mexico to work for a mining company: “He was Cornish, from a mining family and, you see, the mines in Cornwall failed. I’m not sure of the date—it would have been the early part of the century—the tens or twenties” (*The ZigzagWay*57). He tells her that he had come here to Dona Vera’s Centre for the Study of Huichol to find out about her connection to the mines. This, in fact, infuriates Dona Vera who proudly tells Eric that:

You are mis-in-formed, señor. I may be run-ning this centre and it may be fam-i-ly property, but the mines, they were before my time. I did not arrive here till the forties, and I am myself an eth-no-grapher,’ she spaced out her syllables as if for someone lesser intelligence,’ and trained as an an-thro-polo-gist with some of the greatest teachers in the field. I have worked among the Huichol Indians, the first, the first Euro-pean woman to do so. I founded my centre to protect them, their env-ir-on-ment, their hist-ory, and rel-ig-ion. I am not one of those who took their land and ru-ined it with mining and made them slaves (*The ZigzagWay*57)

She imperiously informs Eric that “If it is mines you are interested in, then it is not to me you should come. Not to my centre. Here we work to keep the cul-ture and re-lig-ion and art of the Huichol a-live that the min-ing in-dus-try near-ly destroyed. On the one hand is greed, señor, on the other—respect!” (*The ZigzagWay*58).

Making a New World: Cornish Miners in Mexico: or Dona Vera, Huichols might be the subject of anthropological research but, for Eric, Huichols and Mexico fascinate because the place has personal connection. Eric’s grandparents have lived here as Cornish Diaspora. After the discovery of America and other New Worlds, a large scale migration from Europe to new European settlements took place between the 17th to 19th centuries. It is estimated that more than 60 million people left Europe between 1815 and 1932. The countries that received this migratory flow were the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Venezuela, Cuba, Uruguay, Chile, Peru and Mexico. In Mexico, many Cornish people or “Cousin Jacks”, as they were popularly known, migrated because of the decline of the tin and copper mining industries in Cornwall. Writing about this The Great Migration, it is reported that Alone of the counties of South Western England Cornwall witnesses significant migration in the period dubbed The Great Migration (c 18150-1930), losing some 20 percent of its male adult population overseas in every decade from 1861 to 1901; three times the average for England and Wales. With a population that never exceeded 500,000 in the nineteenth century, Cornwall lost anywhere between a quarter to half a million people, making it an emigration region comparable to any in Europe. Today there are over 6 million people of Cornish descent worldwide. (“Mining Migration”)Eric’s grandfather, Davey Rowse too had come to Mexico because of the devastating collapse of the economy in Cornwall. Davey Rowse worked in the silver mines of Mexico. Davey Rowse proposes marriage to Betty Jennings and both come to Mexico to

start a new life in the New World. In fact both belong to the Cornish diaspora community which emigrated from the Cornwall, is found in various parts of Canada, USA, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Due to the decline of the tin and copper mining industries in Cornwall, it is assumed that more than twenty million Cornish migrated in the second half of nineteenth century. Most of these worked as labourers in mines abroad. They had been forced to leave their homeland mainly because of economic problems they had to face at home. This has been aptly put in the novel when the reader is reported about Betty Jennings's marriage with Davey Rowse:

It was the house where Betty was born and had lived till she promised her hand to Davey Rowse. They had met at a service in a Methodist chapel he has come to one Sunday before he set off to work in the silver mines of Mexico like so many others who had lost their jobs when the tin mines went out of business. (*The ZigzagWay*120)

Thus Davey Rowse and Betty Jennings are displaced from their homeland due to the lack of employment opportunities at home which happened to be one of the major reasons for mass migration in the early and middle years of imperialism. In fact, Davey Rowse and Betty Jennings can be considered the Cousin Jack and Cousin Jennie who left their distinctive cultural mark, remembered today across the globe from Mexico to New Zealand. Not much is reported in the novel about Davey Rowse apart from the fact he worked in Mexico as miner and also served in the army when the War broke out in Europe. What we know in the novel about Cornish community in Mexico comes from Betty Jennings's viewpoint. Betty Jennings travels to Mexico in 1910 to marry a Cornish miner. She goes to Mexico because "the Hammer family who lived in a grand house up the hill from Padstow was returning to Mexico after the birth of another child and needed a girl to help on the voyage. They would pay good money for a 'willing girl, healthy and clean'. Betty was that" (*The ZigzagWay*120). And Betty arrives in Mexico:

In 1910, on a day of high wind and leaping waves and the stink of fish rotting in the sun and on the sand, Betty Jennings of Delabole, Cornwall, came off the boat Mary Ward with the Hammer family that had engaged her to be a maid for their children during the voyage from Liverpool to Veracruz. (*The ZigzagWay*120)

After her arrival in Mexico, she writes letter to her father and sisters and these letter are all that Eric manages to find to connect the disjointed past of his family as Eric has previously told Em. Her letters are important in many respects. Through them, Betty describes the topography of the New World, that is Mexico. One such letter detailing Mexican topography is as follows:

Occasionally, they saw in the distance the white bell tower and dome of a church in the shadow of a mountain, or a man riding a burro bareback across the valley, or a pair of wild horses grazing where a hidden barranco was marked by a sheath of green. (*The ZigzagWay*123)

Betty's letters are also significant in another sense because they reveal her sense of alienation born out of displacement. Though Betty tries hard to adjust in the New World she lives, yet the home *there* remains her central concern. In her letter, she always compares her new world with

Cornwall. Her heart remains in Cornwall:

Now Davey has come to fetch me and my bag is all packed again and we are to take the train north. We will go straight to the chapel from the boarding house and be married there. Davey says the chapel is just *like the one at home* and we will have *his Cornish friends* as witness. Mrs. Moran who runs the boarding house will give me away, Father, and she is like a mother to Davey so you need have no fears. *I will think of all of you at home in Cornwall and in my heart I will be with you even if I am here in Mexico.* (*The ZigzagWay*123 italics mine)

Betty's arrival to Mexico in 1910 coincides with the year Mexican Revolution is said to have begun under the leadership of General Madero against autocratic rule of Porfirio Díaz. Díaz's rule started in 1872 and is remembered for the advances he brought in industry and modernization. But the progress of industry came at the expense of the working class. Farmers and miners both complained of oppression and exploitation. As he supported the construction of factories, roads, dams, and industries, the economy took a great leap. But Díaz has almost transformed himself into a dictator:

More than 95% of Mexico's land was owned by less than 5% of the population. This vastly unequal distribution of land—and, therefore, wealth—had plagued Mexico for many years, to the anger and dismay of the working classes. Workers on the vast "haciendas" were often treated like slaves, being beaten for the slightest infraction—real or imagined—and murders of workers by their "masters" were common. (What is a Sacred Mountain Worth?)

General Madero protested against this and planned to contest Presidential election against Díaz for which he was imprisoned. He promised agrarian reforms, fled from the prison and built an army of the peasants and miners which later defeated the Mexican Federal army. He replaced Díaz as President. In the novel, the early years of revolution are reported from Betty's perspective. Though the novel does not detail the causes and consequences of the Revolution, its filtered version is presented to the reader as Betty might have seen. The war disturbs the order of the life. Soon "the mineros began to disappear from their own mine, without a word" (*The ZigzagWay*140). They started leaving to fight for their country, some with the rebels and some with the federals. The situation is worsened and a time comes when all the women are asked to evacuate the town, which faces attack from the rebels. And Betty, now pregnant, is forced to leave the town devastated.

Silver-Sacred Controversy: The Huichol: The novel is also remarkable in its representation of the indigenous people of Mexico. The Huichol, who also call themselves the Wikárika People or Wixairika, are a little-known group of some 7,000-9,000 individuals whose traditional homeland is the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the Mexican states of Jalisco and Nayarit. While a part of the community is already transformed/ Mexicanised, the remaining Huichol preserve its cultural autonomy in its isolated mountain. Huichol Indians has been in news recently. A Canadian company, First Majestic Silver Corp, has been in controversy over its plans to mine silver from a mountain considered sacred by the indigenous Huichol community which believes that the mountain is the

birthplace of their Sungod. Tim Harvey further informs that the “6,327 hectares covered by First Majestic's mining rights contain an estimated \$1.325 billion worth of silver” but this region is considered sacred by the Huichol (“What Is a Sacred Mountain Worth?”). Now the issue is how to resolve this silver-sacred controversy. The Huichol are claiming their ancient ownership of the land which is sacred. Sacred Natural Sites are “those natural areas which, in addition to their biodiversity importance, are sacred spaces for indigenous peoples, and where ceremonies with a divine character are performed. In these sites reality is seen and perceived under a magic, spiritual and natural perspective, and ritual offerings and ceremonies of the indigenous peoples take place” (“What Is a Sacred Mountain Worth?”). If the sacredness of the mountain is acknowledged, it amounts to commercial loss of the company. And if the mining is allowed to go, it violates territorial rights of the indigene. Desai does not directly deal with this controversy in the novel. In the novel, she writes about the strange companionship of Dona Vera with a Huichol youth:

He had been brought to her as a boy who had hurt his arm while on the pilgrimage, the youngest member of a group from Nayarit. They had all been weakened by that long journey, and the fasting that went with it, and the trek over stony terrain. She had ordered the kitchen staff to provide them with food straightaway and invited them to stay. They refused but when she saw they had a young boy with them who held his arm in such agony and yet held back his tears, she brought out her box of medicines and bandages, and treated it. (*The Zigzag Way* 83-4)

Dona Vera claims to work for preserving Huichol knowledge and culture. Though she is herself an outsider, a foreigner yet she prides in presenting Huichols to the World, the people and their places. It is important to understand here that the trinity of peyote, deer and maize has a deep symbolic and religious meaning in life of Huichol people. In the review of Barbara G. Myerhoff's book *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of Huichol Indians*, Lee Drummond writes that

the deer-maize-peyote complex... [is] embedded in a particular historical framework and as deriving its profound meaning from the realities of Huichol past and present... According to Myerhoff, the symbolic significance of the deer "reflects and expresses that part of their religion... which derives from a relatively recent past as deer hunters" (p. 201). In contrast, she attributes the religious importance of maize to the fact that "maize came later, was brought by outsiders, and more important, a life based on maize is precarious" (p. 209) (Drummond 415-16)

Further, Peyote hunt is integral religious practice of Huichol Indians. During this peyote hunt, people go on an annual pilgrimage with a desire to return to the source of all life and heal oneself. For the hunt, they travel 300 miles to collect peyote which grows on the holy mountain of Wirikuta. In the Huichol religion, there are more than a hundred gods of which three principal gods are Tatewari, Tayau, and Kauyumaki. Tatewari - "our Grandfather fire" – is the supreme deity, the ruler of the world. Tayau is "our father sun," the sun god. He is dangerously powerful and can send misfortunes as warnings or punishments. Kauyumaki is the

deer spirit. In the novel, Desai has devoted a very short chapter dealing Huichol cosmology. It is important to understand here that Desai does not want to politicize the indigenous issue in Mexico. In fact, the silver mining controversy is not directly portrayed in the novel. Her intention is merely to foreground the existence of the Huichol community before the discovery of the New World. She just puts two worlds together side by side foregrounding both. Her focus is only to suggest what has happened to the Huichol community because of mining. Eric arrives in Mexico just before Día de los Muertos (The Day of the Dead) "when the families clustered around the graves, cleaning them, decorating them with colourful marigolds" (*The Zigzag Way* vii). It is a gathering of living remembering the dead. Eric's journey is also a sort of remembrance to the dead, i.e. to his grandparents and to Huichols. In conclusion, it can be argued that *The Zigzag Way* is about displacements. The Huichol Indians seem to be displaced by the mining activities. The Cornish have been displaced too. Unlike these two forced displacements, Eric's displacement is more willful and deliberate. The novel is about migration and mobility. It's about discovering new worlds and later suffering its consequences.

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