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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/8940>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.8940

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2009

Number of pages: 143-152

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Suhasini Vincent, "A Descent down the Ladder of Time in Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 31.2 | 2009, Online since 24 December 2021, connection on 12 April 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/8940> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8940>



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A DESCENT DOWN THE LADDER OF TIME IN ANITA DESAI'S *THE ZIGZAG WAY*

This paper studies Anita Desai's experimental sleight of hand in *The Zigzag Way* and explores how new ideas erupt from old yarns as the immigrant-protagonist absorbs the mysteries of an older world, enriches his territory in the New World by mining the graveyard of history, and stakes his claim by letting the New World Encounter influence, take over and transform his world. This study shall reveal how the novel's fictional space re-captures the dilemmas and the nostalgia of immigrant experiences and shows how the descent down the "ladder of time" helps the protagonists discover that everyone comes from somewhere else.

Anita Desai, an Indian diasporic author who has resided in Delhi, Massachusetts, Cambridge and Mexico, has the credit of being a three-time Booker Prize nominee. Born to a Bengali father and a German mother, Desai's bicultural upbringing in British colonial India and her maternal ties to pre-war Germany helped her "sail into wider seas and experience different worlds" (Desai, "Bicultural" 121). Following the trend set by great novelists like E.M. Forster, Henry James and Vladimir Nabokov, whose literary genius portrayed New Worlds that were richer, more complex and more mysterious than their native homelands, Desai has set her fourteenth novel in Mexico,¹ thus following in the new trend of globalised Indian writing where writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Bharathi Mukherjee and Suniti Namjoshi pen the trials of immigrants as participants in a new modernity of "collective" and "individual" displacement. In *The Zigzag Way*, Desai weaves together strands of lost memories of immigrant miners from Cornwall who crossed the high seas to seek a new beginning in the gold and silver mines of Mexico. The novel's diegesis takes the reader on a discovery of many chapters of history—European, Mexican and Huichol—thus linking historical events of Mexico, Cornwall, New England and Vienna. I shall explore how the novel abounds with the hybrid mingling of Christian and Pagan rites, as in the celebration of the feast day of *Día de los Muertos* when the living and the dead re-unite and link together the past and the present. The novel's hybrid fictional space is replete with efforts to unravel the past as the protagonists re-embark on a passage to New Spain, re-trace ancestry, and re-locate the lost fabled ghost town of the Sierra.² Memories of turbulent history re-surge and re-envelop the fictional space as the rich seams of the Mexican ghost mining town reveal the life of the Cornish Jacks in the midst of revolutions triggered by Emiliano Zapata. I shall thus consider how Desai reconfigures various descents down figurative ladders such as the "ladder of time," the "ladder of matter and life" in Mexican mythology, the "ladder of memory," the "ladder of mining history,"

1. Desai's eleventh novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) was half-set in the United States, and in her volume of short stories entitled *Diamond Dust* (2000), the fictional space of the short stories portray India, Cornwall and Mexico.

2. The historic mines of the Sierra lie within a mountainous parallelogram of the Mexican Andes, 1,600 miles long by 250 miles wide, extending from Sonora in the north to Oaxaca in the south. About no less than 1.2 billion ounces of gold, equivalent to sixteen per cent of the world's total, has been unearthed until now (Todd 28). It is interesting to know that Spanish expeditions ventured to Mexico way back in the second and third decades of the sixteenth century, desperately wanting to lay their hands on the mythical wealth that lay unearthed in the Sierra Madre (Diaz 8).

the “ladder of a pilgrim’s progress” and the “ladder of each closing day,” to show how collective memory can re-surge, re-emerge and be re-written by the migrant writer.

The novel’s epigraph suggests a descent down the “ladder of time”: “The ancient Chinese believed time is not a ladder one ascends into the future but a ladder one descends into the past.” (Desai, *The Zigzag Way* 1)³ Through the masterfully placed opening lines of the novel, Desai prepares the reader for a world where the immigrant-protagonist retraces the existing tunnels of the past, descends old shafts and discovers new veins of precious ore that spring out as the past fuses with the present. Desai reinforces the idea of a descent by figuring the Mexican creation myth of the Huichol tribe in which Kauyumari, the Mexican deer spirit, descends the celestial tunnel of light to bring daylight to the Earth. As the last one to tunnel his way from the sky realm, it is believed that Kauyumari’s tracks still remain in the Mexican landscape as the divine taproot peyote,⁴ so that “others could follow and also experience the time of their ancestors and understand where they came from and who they were” (*ZW* 137). The reader absorbs the message of the cosmogonic myth that insists on the need to delve into the past to find new meaning for the present. It is interesting to consider the myth of Quetzalcoatl—or the plumed serpent—and the allusion to the “ladder of matter and life” in the fictional space, and the importance of this myth in post-revolution Mexico. Quetzalcoatl is a composite figure in Mexican mythology “describing the many orders of matter in creation: a kind of ladder with man at the centre, but extending downward into animal, water, and mineral; and upward to the planets, the life-giving sun, and the god creators” (Nicholson 82). In the novel, the protagonist Vera, who tries in vain to erase all tracks of the past, is described as “a coiled serpent” (*ZW* 46) who “had evidently sloughed off the past and emerged like some sly and secretive snake in its new skin, to continue on her way” (*ZW* 96). Through the use of the palato-alveolar sounds of “serpent,” “sloughed,” “sly,” “secretive,” and “skin,” Desai highlights the elusive character of the protagonist. The allusion to Quetzalcoatl is clear as the name is made of “*quetzal*, a rare bird with green feathers inhabiting the highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala, living in the tops of trees, seldom visible, and distinguished from other birds in having only two front toes with almost no claws; and *coat*, which is the Nahua word for snake but which is itself a combination of *co*, generic term for serpent or snake in the Maya language, and *atl*, the Nahua word for water” (Nicholson 79-82). As a cosmically complete mythological figure, Quetzalcoatl represents both water and earth as the crawling snake and the imperial bird. From the heavenly realms Quetzalcoatl drops to earth by a “ladder” knotted like a sacrificial lash to descend into matter and unite with the serpent to save the universe from extinction and to open up latent possibilities not only for the heavenly bodies but also for Mexico.⁵ The myth insists on the idea that all things change perpetually into something else and that everything is elusive and intangible, but yet remains true. In the fictional space, Vera’s true colours are revealed as she shrugs off her kimono of “shot silk in the colours of the quetzal, and when it fell away, she was reduced to an inner layer of grey cotton so that a reverse cycle had been performed from that of a chrysalis to butterfly or fledging

3. All subsequent references to the novel will be abbreviated to *ZW* in parenthesis.

4. Irene Nicholson, in *Mexican and Central American Mythology*, describes how the artistic Huichol Indians of west Mexico regard the peyote as a divine plant. The ingestion of this tap root gave them a feeling of well-being and evoked “visual hallucinations of the remote past” (Nicholson 71).

5. From Teotihuacan on the high plateau to Chichen Itza in Yucatan and farther south, Quetzalcoatl figures as the dominant motif on ancient monuments. He is symbolic of the post-revolution Mexican desire to re-establish its old traditions (Nicholson 78).

to a peacock" (ZW 80). Unlike the classical pattern of metamorphic tales which draw a parallel between the wondrous emergence of the imago from the chrysalis, Vera stages the reverse transformation to highlight how disfigurements reveal true inner character. In the novel, Doña Vera's attempts at metamorphosis, her emergence in Mexico and her erasure of all tracks of her European past is juxtaposed with Eric's uncertain quest for his family's unknown entry into the New World.

In Desai's fictional space, Mexican creation myths mingle with tales of wanderlust as the immigrant-protagonist retraces the veins of silver and gold ore that twist and turn below ground without any regard for political frontiers.⁶ The Cornish miners who left impoverished Cornwall in the nineteenth century shared the same disregard and crossed the high seas to descend the crudely hewn tree-trunk ladders of the Mexican mines with the hope of reworking idle silver and gold mines of Mexico that had been wrecked and left derelict in the wars of Independence from Spain. The mellifluous names of gold mines re-stir distant memories of a Cornish miner's quest for flakes of gold nonsense.

Eric was later to describe the experience, to Em, as like stumbling into a rabbit hole—falling, falling, he said, till all was a welter of strange words, strange names, churning around him. Then with a bump, landing upon the startling awareness that many of them were actually familiar to him. It was like being in a crowd of swiftly moving strangers and finding that there were faces among them that you recognised. Or like walking, with difficulty, through a gravel and coming across veins of liquid brightness running through them. Golden dramatic words unfurling through the rubble, words like Sierra Madre Oriental, Sierra de los Catorce, Real del Monte, La Purisima, La Ascuncion, Los Lorenzos, La Luz, Valenciana [...], and he had heard them before; each had an image, a memory linked to it that he struggled to resurrect. His mind scrambled, as if on its knees, to recover the images they had once conjured. (ZW 31-2)

The descent down the ladder of mining memory is presented through a narrative sequence of "singularisation," or the presentation of an episode in a narrative from a particular, unusual point of view. Eric's descent down the ladder of memory is likened to Alice's magical stumble into a rabbit hole emphasised by the repetitive pairs of words in "falling" and "strange words." The reference to the nineteenth century English classic may be analysed keeping in mind the postcolonial writer's attempt to weave a world of distortion, wonder and fantasy shaped and influenced by childhood memories of their tumble into a Western fictional world of children's classics. Like Lewis Carroll who stages the improbable event of Alice's entry into Wonderland through the tunnel and the well of a Victorian topsy-turvy underworld, Desai stages Eric's fall into a lost Mexican mining world of syntactic disruption replete with strange names of mines. In *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll aptly shuffles and rearranges playing cards to show how Victorian ideas of respectability and order can be overturned in Wonderland, a land free of Victorian ideas and strict codes of order and decorum. Similarly, Desai imagines a descent down the ladder of time to resurrect lost Mexican history and to show how suppressed memories of Cornish miners

6. In the 1880s the Cornish miners found their way into Mexico from Arizona, following the veins of ore that connects Clifton, Globe, Morenci and Bisbee in Arizona and then Cananea, Nacozari, Cieneguita and Santo Nino on the Yaqui river as far south as Alamos in Sonora; or the gold veins which extend from Pearce, a Cornish camp, and Tombstone, down through Magdalena, Ures, Hermosillo and Guymas districts, to emerge across the Gulf of California in the Boleo mines in the deserts of Santa Rosalia in Baja California. The Cornish miner made his way along all these veins of ore, and traversed the mountain ranges of Cananea to arrive in northern Mexico (Todd 170).

that dare not be voiced, can burst forth in a whirlpool of familiar words that conjure up the forgotten past. In *Alice in Wonderland*, the final episode shows how “the whole pack rose up into the air, came flying down upon her” (Carroll 97), in a reshuffle that brings the wonderland game to an end, and leaves Alice with the treasure of her memories of her adventures in Wonderland. In *The Zigzag Way*, the eruption of old memories where images pop out from the mind’s unfathomable depths demand that the protagonist perform a conjurer’s apt act of juggling and swift reshuffling of images into sequential order to link the disparate scrambled sequence into an ordered one, so Eric pieces together the pieces of the puzzle to reconstruct images of the past.

We also find that the descent down the shafts of time to bring up the liquid brightness of memory ore to the surface finds another parallel in the step on the last rung down the ladder of each closing day.

When he finally went down to bed—down, down the stone stairwell, one pounding step after another, in semi-darkness, the last journey of the day—he felt his head, his brain, his mind come crashing down together. Bits and pieces, shreds and shards, all cluttered and confused and rattling as he threw himself on the bed. He lay against the red cushions, under the white wool rug, and tried to steady the swinging of his mind. (ZW 11)

The chaotic tumble down the tunnel of sleep can be heard in the anaphoric repetition of the word “down.” The juxtaposition of matching pairs of words, such as “bits and pieces,” “shreds and shards,” denotes separate and unconnected flashes of chaotic memory. Further evidence of syntactic scrambling of words is found in the accumulation of verbiage—“cluttered,” “confused,” “rattling,” and “swinging”—that aims at highlighting the immigrant’s transition from the world of order to that of chaos.

Eric’s immigrant journey finds a parallel in the biblical reference to the heavenly ladder in the Old testament. In Jacob’s dream, the ascent up the “ladder of life” is replete with trepidations, as each rung represents a trial and the acquisition of a virtue. In *The Zigzag Way*, Desai compares the immigrant arrival in the New World to the pilgrim’s arrival in the heavenly realms and the discovery of a New World.

He thought of himself cutting the figure of a timid pilgrim who sinks down in despair again and again along the way, needing to be coaxed and assisted into rising and going on, and avoided looking at himself in the tin-framed mirror as he rubbed his hair dry. (ZW 6)

Like the pilgrim’s progress which is filled with moments of despair, the immigrant journey into the New World is replete with moments of uncertainty, and the immigrant-pilgrim has to be coaxed forward to rise and complete the trajectory. Desai brings forth the idea of a descent from “light” to “darkness” to discover the layers of sediment that sift away as the veins of memory ore resurge back into the present. In presenting the binary of “light” and “darkness,” Desai’s descriptions of the bright exterior of the cathedral contrast sharply with her observations of the coffin-like darkness of the cathedral’s interior.

The cathedral appeared to be on another, higher level. He made his way towards it up a steep lane where booths were being set up to offer the holiday makers what they might need for celebration: tallow candles and buckets filled with amaranth, marigolds and gladioli, trays full of sugar skulls and freshly baked rolls, sprinkled with coloured sugar, the *pan de muertos*. [...] Then there was a flight of steps to climb, even steeper and stonier than the lane, and beggars posted themselves along it as if in some medieval painting. [...] One had to make one’s way past them as though this was Calvary itself before one could reach the sudden open

space of the plaza, and soaring from there into a sky that shouted out light, the great rose-pink Cathedral of carved *cantera* stone. (ZW 109)

The immigrant-pilgrim's receptive nerve cells construct images and perceive the cathedral's facade through sensory methods of perception. The visual sense of sight dominates in this passage as the illusion of height is expressed through the presentation of the edifice on a higher level with the pilgrim facing the challenge of negotiating steep steps and stony lanes. Eric has to break the code of colour in this cathedral scene where the eye follows the rose-pink beams to enter into a space that voices the exuberance of yellow light. Olfactory senses seem awakened by the presence of sweet smelling flowers for the graves like amaranth, marigolds and gladioli. People selling their wares of sugar skulls and freshly baked *pan de muertos* stir the senses of smell and create an aura of celebration to welcome back the dead. This passage is followed by the descent into the deep darkness of the cathedral compared to a "gelid solidity" and a "thickness as of blood, or drugged sleep" (ZW 110-11).

A kind of distinctive murmur congealed into a single, massed hum and Eric guessed it was the prayers and confessions being mumbled by all in the comforting dark shadows. He wondered if all the confessions and all the penance for the world's sins were not being released here, in the murky darkness, and humming around him in an endless spiral. In the bright, bleak chapels of the north, guilt and sin were not permitted, but they seemed to have gathered here for refuge and to live on, an unquiet, numinous and murmurous life in the forgiving dark. The past was alive here—crepuscular and underground, but also palpable. (ZW 111-12)

Through "descriptive hypotyposis" the narrator paints the scene so vividly and with such energy that it becomes in some way visible to the reader. The darkness serves to highlight the contrast between Mexican pagan conceptions of religious rites and European conceptions of sacred space that contrast in colour, ambience and devotional practices. There is also an indirect reference to the fact that pagan Mexican rites are performed in comforting darkness. This comparison between "light" and "darkness," "pagan" and "christian" rites, serves to contrast the immigrant's view of a New World that seems real, solid and tangible, but at the same time a world that has unreal, virtual, illusionary and mirage-like dimensions. Through *parachesis*, the repetition of the same sound in words in clauses of immediate succession, and the accumulation and combination of syntagms similar in nature or function, having the same final sound, as in "indistinctive murmur," "massed hum," "mumbling" and "humming of confessions," the narrator turns the narrative or description into an image, a picture and a living scene. Through *parastasis*, the accumulation of sentences repeating the same idea of darkness and night, and through descriptions like "murky darkness," of "unquiet, numinous and murmurous life in the forgiving dark," the narrator brings forth the idea that the bright façade of the edifice holds dark secrets in its interior where accumulated human expression bursts forth and resurges back into memory from the graveyard of history. The past is also described as "crepuscular," and as a moment when twilight reigns peaceful and supreme before or after the onset of day or the beginning of night. The past also refers to the historical past and suppressed memory that is waiting to resurge and burst forth back into the present.

Desai's experimental artifice is visible in the different forms of fusion of novelistic techniques to present different points of view. On the one hand, time in the novel is structured as linear "felt" time, when the illusory sense of the passing of time is conveyed through the normal pace of the narrative with episodes of "acceleration" and "deceleration." Eric's

vision in the cathedral is awakened by laughter that lasts a split second in the conclusion of Part II: "He heard laughter, the laughter of a young girl, ringing out clear and light-hearted in the dark." (ZW 112) Here, few words are devoted to accelerating the tempo of the narrative, and the discourse time is shorter than the story time. The omniscient narrator telescopes the events of several months to accelerate the pace of the narrative. The split-second laughter in clock time is followed by instances of "deceleration" in Part III of the novel, in which the narrator lingers over the scene, dramatises the vision in "scene" when the discourse time is equal to the story time, and elaborates the circumstances that ignite and infuse Betty's mirth. Desai's experimental sleight of hand weaves in various strands of magical realist and fantastic artefacts in the fictional space, and the narrative also abounds with analeptic flashbacks and proleptic foreshadowing to present disparate time sequences that leap back into the past. In *The Zigzag Way*, the reader discovers the existence of a Latin American space of magical realist surprises where time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity, and the unreal happens as part of reality. *La Noche de los Muertos* serves as the ideal Mexican background to stage the return of the dead in the fictional space and the representation as "real" of an episode incompatible with reality. Vera performs the Mexican custom of beckoning the dead back to life for the feast of *la Noche de los Muertos*: "Ramon, if I put put tequila for you tomorrow, and a cigar and tamales then, will you come? Will you?" (ZW 80) Through the narrative sublime style of *prosopopoeia*, Desai accords her dead protagonists the ability to act, speak and respond. In the fantastic fictional space of *The Zigzag Way*, Ramon, the dead Huichol, emerges as Ramon, the god, in the form of a Mexican zopilote or buzzard.

It was not Ramon but a zopilote pretending to be Ramon and it was leading an army of zopilotes that was emerging from the armoire, two by two, in perfect formation. They were not flying but walking, marching, kicking out their big clawed feet and stiff booted legs that might have looked wooden if they had not also looked military. (ZW 83)

The magical realist dream sequence highlights how hidden skeletons in cupboards return to life to parade and voice suppressed history. In the fictional space, Vera lives in a magical realist state where there is no longer any separation between dreams and reality. The hallucinogenic peyote mushrooms enable the protagonists to dream and revision events from their past, but also to perceive those of their ancestors. In *The Zigzag Way*, "fantasy," "dreams" and "unreality" figure on the same plane as the "real" and need to be taken into consideration in trying to understand human thought and behaviour. The half-human and half-bird dream protagonists manifest warrior-like physical attributes as they strut out of the cupboard with clawed talons and army boots. Further ingestion of *pulque*, the juice of the maguey cactus, helps the protagonists to laugh at death. Here Desai configures the ancient Mayan custom when warriors drank *pulque* to mock death. Mayan time cycles find their configuration in the fictional space where the emphasis is on time being measured not in dates, but in cycles of revival during which the dead return to the world of the living, thus figuring how "time created the nexus that connected humans to their fates and the gods" (Hill Boone 2). The novel's final lines stage a magical realist return to the normal after *la Noche de los Muertos*, when the church bells ring insistently, calling the dead back to their graves and everything streams back to where it had come from. The narrator also possesses magical realist knowledge of events to come and collapses time in order to create a setting in which the present repeats or resembles the past. In the fictional space, the painter of retablos draws swirling free shapes in dark herbal dye for each passing generation to

recount tales that retrace the steps of ancestors. Eric buys a pot from the painter of retablos unaware that his grandmother had done the same decades ago.

Stories of transformation born at moments of historical and cultural metamorphosis leap and shift with their own vitality and fantasy in Desai's universe, as they reveal the power of the storyteller to convey new ideas about changing selves, and enact processes that move and structure imagination. Vera's metamorphosis from Austrian dancer to anthropologist is emphasised by her desire to ape the wolf shaman and "perform the same rites he undergoes to get in touch with his animal spirit and become a wolf with a wolf's knowledge of the world" (ZW 87). Metamorphosis in the fictional space serves to emphasise the uncertainty of the modern, and conveys the desire of the protagonists to move on and accept the contemporary. Even though the fictional space abounds with traces of magical realism, I would also like to highlight the fact that certain characteristics in the novel definitely do not fall into the category of the magical realist mode as it abounds in fantastic elements. The protagonists' reaction to surprise is inconsistent with the magical realist mode. It is interesting to consider how "the fantastic exists in the hinterland between 'real' and 'imaginary,' and the shifting relations between them through its indeterminacy" (Jackson 35), whereas in magical realist fiction the authorial voice acknowledges that his tale sounds perhaps a mite improbable, but insists that "the reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events—and hence experiences some unsettling doubts" (Faris 171). In magical realist fiction, the protagonists merely toy with hesitation and accept the extraordinary as part of reality. This is not the case in the fantastic fictional space of *The Zigzag Way*, in which Eric's hesitation is sustained and lasts throughout the novel. Instead of just presenting events or surroundings as natural and perfectly ordinary, the omniscient narrator explains in great detail the characteristics that make the event or setting extraordinary, as in the presentation of Huichol customs and the play of history in the novel. Like the protagonists, the reader experiences periods of sustained hesitation that persist throughout *The Zigzag Way*. This sustained hesitation stands in stark contrast to the type of hesitation one may experience in a work of magical realist literature in which, to quote Wendy Faris, "the reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events and hence experiences some unsettling doubts" (Faris 171). Therefore, a vast difference exists between the brief hesitation experienced when reading a work of magical realism, and reading a work of fantastic literature, when sustained hesitation occurs. In Desai's fictional space, the juxtaposition of "unreal" and "real" events, the "magical realist" and the "fantastic," serve as a sort of counterbalance and aim at seizing the mystery that breathes behind the existence of things.

Desai brings forth the idea of light emanating from darkness, of layers of sediment sifting away as the veins of memory ore resurge back into the present. Vera's discovery of the old mines and her description of the *Hacienda de la Soledad* as a "graveyard of history" (ZW 67) may be interpreted through the play of "light" and "darkness" in the novel. While exploring the ruined and abandoned mines, she discovers the lost memory ore of Mexico's turbulent history. She relives the exploitation suffered by the miners at the hands of the mine owners during the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, and the revolution of Emiliano Zapata which crushed the dreams of simple mining folk.⁷

7. "The revolution of 1910 signalled the end of the forty-four-year long presidency of Porfirio Diaz. Week after week and year after year rival armies marched over the City of Mexico, led by different revolutionary commanders as Alvaro Obregon, Pablo Gonzales and Emiliano Zapata." (Todd 163)

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. [...] 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: "Tierra y Libertad!" Taking a few steps into that darkness, she was brought to a standstill by the total absence of light. Not a chink, not a shaft, and not the possibility of one: it could only grow darker, blacker, more totally. Still, she stood waiting to see if something would materialize—an eye that watched, a movement. [...] Sounds of the Revolution. (ZW 68-9)

Dark history resurges back into the present and unfolds itself in the pitch darkness of the deserted caves. The echoes of long forgotten history resound and seem magnified due to the total absence of light. The sounds of the revolution, of the atrocities committed by the silver barons, the pounding of horse hoofs, resurface to light as Vera descends the "ladder of suppressed memories." The veins of memory ore that flash back to life awaken the ghosts of the past who guide the reader to unrecorded accounts of personal history and unveil collective memory of Cornish miners who toiled in Mexican mines. The descent down the ladder may be likened to Homi Bhabha's description in *The Location of Culture* of "the stairwell," or "the liminal space," or "the in-between space" of identity, or the "connective tissue" that constructs the difference between varying cultures. Seen in this light, the ladder is the "interstitial space," where "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference [and] the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha 2). Eric's descent down the "ladder of his ancestry" is gripped with the terror of entering the unknown as he makes the dramatic transition from one culture into another. It is worth examining the past-mining metaphor through the parallel zigzag track traced by miners and immigrants in the fictional space.

[The tenateros] walk in a zigzag motion 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. At this point he laid the book across his chest to face unimpeded that same current of air as had met the miners, forcing them to adopt the lurching, zigzag motion that he felt he had been, throughout his journey, imitating. Was this the world his grandfather had found when he crossed the ocean and sought out new territory where he might stake his claim? The effort to enter that past, as if it were a mine that no light pierced and where no air circulated, exhausted Eric and he gave himself up to sleep, gratefully. (ZW 79)

The descent into the past is compared to the oblique moment adopted by the miners to descend into the mines. Eric's claustrophobic descent down the "ladder of time" takes him down tunnels of time back to his grandfather's immigrant journey from Cornwall to Mexico to create a new life in the New World. The Cornish miners in the fictional space occupy a perpetual position of "in-betweenness," being "insiders" and "outsiders" unable to exist comfortably in both cultures. Through the mining metaphor, Desai portrays the immigrant's desire to accept the new culture without loosening his hold over his past, and at the same time she voices the immigrant's longing to enrich the new territory with his cultural traditions. In the introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha discusses "the borderline work of culture" as one that demands an encounter with "newness" that is not part of "the continuum of past and present," one that "creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation" (Bhabha 7). Bhabha's theory posits that the "new historical subject" acquires a more empowering vision of the vaster totality, and attributes

the traumatic process through which this vision is derived to cultural translation. Eric's oscillation, his trepidation, his fear of discovering the unknown and his desire to conquer the new, can be attributed to what Bhabha calls a "sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an explanatory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words *au-delà*—here and there, on all sides, fort / da, hither and thither, back and forth" (Bhabha 1). In Desai's *The Zigzag Way*, the hybrid co-existence of "here" and "there" highlight the play between lived reality and the discontinuous past.

The novel's title highlights the zigzag trajectory of the protagonists who opt for an indefinite course of action that opposes linearity or set patterns of behaviour. The sharp turns in alternating directions make them wanderers who travel in quest of immigrant experiences that leave them stranded and adrift. In her essay "Bicultural, Adrift and Wandering," Desai comments on the immigrant writer's capacity to metamorphose into an explorer who on the brink of discovery contemplates and absorbs the flavours and intricacies of the New World. In this essay, Desai refers to the immigrant writer as a "piece of drift wood," who with roots torn up from native soil, drifts into unknown territory chasing an unknown whim or a passing fancy (Desai, "Bicultural, Adrift and Wandering" 124). The protagonists Eric and Em voice the author's view of writers who wander, "stroll around and chat" (ZW 26) to discover new life stories and wait patiently for the flash of inspiration to catch the lit scene and transform the intense experience into words on paper. In the present day trend of globalised writing, it is but natural for the Indian diasporic writer to shift his gaze towards Western worlds, to examine how history has played a role in shaping and reconfiguring destinies in other continents, be it Europe or Latin America, to search for analogues or opposites of India, to capture the links between the present and the past by recoding images and incidents of the immigrant experience, and "to let a wider and more expansive view takeover and transform his world" (ZW 23). Desai's experimental artifice thrives on the principle of constantly striving to find new ideas to portray a changing world. I conclude with Desai's quote of Brodsky's "Anno Domino": "What does a writer do, after all, but sing, with Brodsky: 'So if only in our lifetime, let us be various!'" (Desai, "Bicultural, Adrift and Wandering" 125).

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