

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE LATER NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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Abstract

Anita Desai has carved a special niche in the hearts of her audience, she has been an influential voice in airing the feelings of the voices, which were mostly unheard and unrecognized, and were right on the fringes, of our collective conscience. Her later novels depict her maturity, and a better understanding of the world, in which she first struggled existentially, but nonetheless blossomed later on, for instance, her novel *In Custody* is the story of Nur, a poet representative of the dying culture of Urdu poetry. *Baumgartner's Bombay* is in fact inspired, from a real life story, of a kindhearted German elderly man in Bombay, who was murdered by a young and unstable German man, who had taken shelter in his home. The novel tells of life, in the cities of Berlin, Venice, Calcutta and Bombay. Her characters in *Journey to Ithaca* are representative of the thriving Hippie culture of the 1970's. *Fasting, Feasting* is about the contradictions of cultures, East-West encounter, and their differences as well as similarities. *The Zig Zag Way* represent the final maturing of her craft, as well as her persona as a writer, of heart-touching simple stories, with great intensity as well as a much better understanding of the world that surrounds her. This paper aims to concentrate and analyze, in depth, these beautiful later novels of Desai, from a multicultural perspective, as these stories, have had an enormous influence on her readers.

Anita Desai's later novels document her own journey which she under-took from the land of her birth to, that land of the melting pot; the United States of America and later Mexico. In this chapter, her later novels will be discussed in the context of multiculturalism. From the point-of-view of multiculturalism almost all her novels are perfectly relevant, but these novels could also be understood as a sort of fusion of the multiculturalism which she witnessed while growing up in India; and later moving to the United States, and later when she, experienced India as an 'outsider'. In her later novels, Desai enunciates cultural values and multiculturalism much more vividly, in comparison to her earlier ones.

Desai's novels like *In Custody*, beautifully portray her keen observation and vivid descriptions of the sights and sounds of a typically multicultural Indian society, and culture which are reflected in the small towns and the big cities of India. "The theme of struggle and sacrifice to save the dying Urdu language is against the socio-cultural-economic forces which is the major preoccupation in the novel *In Custody*."¹ This tolerance and co-existence despite their troubles are something to be admired and learnt. Her novels are sublime but also provide hope and comfort amidst chaos and melancholy. The cultural ethos of India has been beautifully described by Desai, especially in her later novels, like *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody*, in both of which she describes the inherent tension between the languages Hindi and Urdu, and the accommodative flexibility multicultural India offers and a passion for which has regulated life in this country since many centuries along with the religious co-existence which is so much emphasized upon by all the major religions, that exist in India.

In custody is the story of an idealist artist, Nur Shahjehanabadi, who also happens to be absolutely brilliant, his mental traumas in a rapidly decaying society are expressed brilliantly. The novel delineates the decay of Urdu language and poetry as well. Desai writes : "The novel also portrays the famous Urdu poet's Nur's fall from grace and his mental turmoil. The main protagonist Deven is a lecturer of Hindi in a local small town college, but he is also a lover of Urdu poetry, his friend Murad who is an editor of a magazine tells him about the decline of quality in Urdu poetry and says,

" Someone has to keep alive the glorious tradition of Urdu literature. If we do not do it, at whatever cost, how will we survive in this era of that vegetarian monster, Hindi ?" . . . Urdu language of the court in days royalty now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No palace for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, no emperors and nawabs to act as its patrons."

" . . . Poems, poems, poems. Everybody writes them, I tell you . . . I had to stop them. I had to pick and choose. Only the best, I sad. Firaq, Faiz, Rafi, Nur . . ." (15)

Desai Portray's the great Urdu poet Nur's helplessness to fight his self-inflicted circumstances, his existential dilemmas, the loss of a sense of belonging to his immediate environment and the vicious circle from which there seems to be neither retreat nor survival or escape. According to the Times Literary Supplement, it is her most subtle and mature work till date.

Desai's *In Custody* is one of her most famous novels. It was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1984 and was also made into a film by Ismail Merchant, by the same name and translated in Urdu as *Muhafiz*.

Desai tells the story of Nur who is renowned Urdu Poet. He has a multidimensional, prodigal and absolutely charming personality, and is talented beyond comparison. The theme of this novel to Salman Rushdie is "the story of inevitable tragedies, which in the end turns out to be a tale of triumph over these misfortunes"³.

When Deven, a small – town scholar, who teaches Hindi in a local college is given an opportunity to interview, India's greatest Urdu poet Nur he is exhilarated, but the reality is quite different from his imagination ! Deven is saddened, cheated, humiliated, bullied and unwillingly burdened with more responsibility and bondage, and gets into a situation that he never ever imagined to be in, even in his wildest dreams. This nightmare continues to haunt him forever, and there is a new confinement, which he has to suffer, in a manner that is unfathomable either to him or to his wife.

When Murad his friend, gives Deven an assignment for his magazine; that is to interview the renowned poet Nur Shahjehanabadi, Deven is excited and imagines it to be a nice distraction from his everyday mundane existence. Murad tells him :

“ . . . Nur will be the star of the issue. The light that blazes in the center and sends its rays to all corners of the world where his verse is known - in Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Russia, Sweden - do you know, we have sent his name to the Nobel Prize Committee for its award for literature once again?” (17)

Desai retains and enforces a powerful case even in this novel in conveying the colours, sounds and sensations of the Indian life, that are full of her own life’s experiences and wisdom accumulated over the years.

Deven dreams of fame and fortune, which will connect him to the throbbingly exciting world of his dreams, the beautiful Urdu poetry of Nur. Desai also describes the awesome historical monuments that can be found everywhere in India. Desai writes,

“ . . . The small mosque of marble and pink sandstone that had been built by a nawab who had fled from the retaliatory action of the British in Delhi after the mutiny of 1857 and wished to commemorate his safe escape to this obscure and thankfully forgotten town, and also to raise a memorial to the grace of God who, he believed that made it possible, was now so overgrown by the shacks, signboards, stalls, booths, rags, banners, debris and homeless poor of the bazaars that it would have been difficult for anyone to discern it beneath this multi-layered covering . . . many men came in . . . and prayed in the small courtyard . . . but none of them thought of it as an historical landmark or remembered the man who had built it or his reasons for doing so.” (20)

Desai also describes the intricacies of the delicate mutual tolerance, profound co-existence and the precarious harmony in the Indian context, and how the advent of democracy has made it possible to improve relations amongst the Hindus and Muslims. Desai has described Mirpore (the typical small town India) and the various religions quarters therein as follows,

“ . . . Their lives were lived almost entirely within the bazaars that joined and separated – the different religious shrines . . . Naturally the area around the mosque was considered the ‘Muslim’ area, and the rest ‘Hindu’. This was not strictly so and there were certainly no boundaries or demarcations, yet there were differences between them that were not apparent to the eye but known and observed by everyone, so that pigs were generally kept out of the vicinity of the mosque and cows never slaughtered near a temple. Once a year, during the Mohurram procession of tazias through the city, police sprang up every where with batons, sweating with a sense of responsibility and heightened tension, intent on keeping the procession away from the temples and from hordes of homeless cows or from groups of gaily coloured citizens who unfortunately often celebrate Holi with packets of powdered colours and buckets of coloured water on the same day as that of the ritual mourning. If these clashed, as happened from time to time, knives flashed, batons failed and blood ran. For a while tension was high, the newspapers - both in Hindi and Urdu –were filled with guarded reports and fulsome editorials on India’s secularity – while overnight news – sheets appeared with less guarded reports laced with threats and accusations. Then the dust of Mirpore rose and swirled and buried everything in sight again; the citizens of Mirpore returned to their daily struggle to breathe. The Hindus slaughtered pigs in their own quarter, the Muslims took to slaughtering buffaloes in place of cows, realizing that the latter would have been tantamount to suicide. The few Christians of the town ate the meat of both and attended the one small white washed brick church set in the cemetery, shaded by dusty neem trees.” (21 – 22)

In Custody is replete with beautiful descriptions of colourful Indian towns and its people. Desai writes while describing a typical Indian multicultural small town, and its sights and sounds:

“ . . . the main bazaar, skirted by mosque, temples, stores, shops and cinema houses.” (22)

The striking note *In Custody* has is that of humour, which is quite refreshing and sometimes even hilarious! Desai has portrayed the decadence, misery, disillusionment and quirkiness of Nur in a very tragic manner, but it definitely has undercurrents of humour throughout. Nur, who still has delusion of grandeur replete with the reminiscences of his glorious olden days is quite charming. For instance, Murad rebukes Deven and says, “You village pumpkin . . . You are still stuck in the age of the printed page, hypnotized by Gutenberg, I suppose. Don’t you know it is over ? Don’t you know the written line is nearly extinct ? If you can’t add sound and slight, it won’t do with the public. The public wants to see and hear, not put spectacles on its nose and learn the alphabet. These days everything is put down on film or tape. Haven’t you seen, or heard you donkey ?” (91)

In the aforesaid lines, Deven’s friend Murad, the editor of an Urdu journal, scolds him for not adhering to the latest technology and of falling behind the rest of the techno-savvy world ! Thus the idea of recording Nur’s rendition of his verses for the posterity strikes Deven, not withstanding its tragi-comic consequences ! It remains quite a noble and unique idea as far as Deven is concerned.

Desai has also depicted the outside world more vividly in this novel. Desai’s portrayal of one of a cunning shopkeeper Mr. Jain, who tries to sell Deven a second hand tape recorder is hilarious !

“Sahib, if it is the latest model you are looking for, why come to me ? Why not go to Honk Kong, Singapore or Manila ? You are man of means, you’r father is the king of Kashmiri Carpets, a wealthy man, he can send you. So why not do what everyone else does these days ? Go on a luxury cruise to the Far East and come back with the latest models – one for you and one for me, huh ? His round belly jumped with laughter under the pink bush shirt and snakes skin belt.” (107)

The contradictions and conflicts between multiculturalism and uniculturalism have been discussed by Desai, and it has been implied by her that any forcible attempt to change the very fabric of, this sensitive and admirable plural diversity is doomed to failure in India. She has insisted on peace, tolerance, mutual respect and a harmonious balance of interests for a peaceful atmosphere devoid of any conflicts so that the hope and dreams of progress of the nation are not dashed to dust. Her emphasis on all of India’s various colours, beauty and harmony of India are absolutely charming and are splendidly depicted in her works.

Deven adores India’s past and the Urdu poetry despite being a Hindu. His disillusionments with the academic and literary world are brilliantly conveyed. In a way, this novel is also about interpreting the Indian nation and nationality, and how the perception of the past, influences the present. Desai’s commitment to bring forth these truths in her narratives has made her one of the most respected writers of our times. She tells the stories of the deepest vulnerabilities and the most disappointing demons of our mind and morality. She finds the troubled soul of all her characters no matter how despicable they might seem. The spark of courage, consciousness and humanity remain intact in her art.

Her integrity and focus is reflected in her craft and the amazing sense of timing she has in her stories The overwhelming mutual discord between the Hindu and Muslims, and that for Pakistan has also been shown in this novel. These misconceptions were at their peak months

before and after the partition of India in 1947 that Desai herself witnessed in Old Delhi. The rich Islamic history and culture have been given prominence, in her later novels that abound in the rich portrayal of India's composite cultural heritage. The beautiful cultural fusion of India and the threat to its existence by the cultural nationalists of any religion has been very well depicted in her novels that are most outstandingly about cultural co-existence and assimilating diversity. This complicated dilemma of existence is expressed by Desai in her novel *In Custody*.

Nur Shahjehanabadi does not live up to Deven's expectations but nonetheless he is admired by Deven for his intense and brilliant rendition of the Urdu verses compiled by him. The questions of national identity, the Hindustani language, rich cultural tradition and history. Muslim predicament and denial of reality in modern India, intolerance, attitude of prejudice and cultural consciousness displayed by both the Hindus and Muslims which leads to harmony and mutual co-existence have been very well perceived and highlighted by Desai in *In Custody*.

The unbendable pride of the Muslims, proved to be a major disadvantage and hindrance in their progress, their adherence to their self respect come ruin or rapture during the British-Raj and the years following the independence enhanced their woes has been exquisitely captured by Anita Desai in her various writings, but the most sincere, prominent and realistic portrayal has been shown in this novel. Desai also dwells upon the tragic and unfathomable mystery of Nur's life, his stunned brilliance, his natural charm, elegance and the cruelty of circumstances that leads to his disillusionment with everything including his dismal and broken personal life, along with the reversal in his fortunes.

The bilateral conflicts, passionate prejudices and bigotry by both Hindus and Muslims and the failure of political and social initiatives in resolving this conflict has been vigorously highlighted by Desai in this brilliant novel which raises the universal question of culture and religions, and their harmonious coexistence in every society.

The fear and revulsion by Deven's bosses with a provincial closed and narrow mindset has been recorded as follows :

“ . . . I'll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu department. I won't have Muslim toadies in my department, you'll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language. I'll complain to the Principal. I'll warn the RSS, you are a traitor.” (145)

The dangerous consequences of religious extremism, mutual suspicion and civil-war could inevitably be the end of the tradition of our spirit of plurality and the continuing cultural co-existence of several religious groups in India, since centuries.

In Custody also has strong feminine characters like Nur's wife Safiya Begum, and her rival Imtiaz Begum, who is an opportunist, a former nautch girl who rips off Nur's poetry passing off his verses as her own ! Deven's wife Sarla's dislike for her husband's over-involvement in Nur and his family life is brilliantly described by Desai, who writes, while describing the mindset and cultural-conditioning of Deven's wife Sarla, and other traditional Hindu women like her who can never go against their husbands no matter how beleaguered they are:

“ . . . countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion”(145-46)

Desai is an avid observer of human nature. She has described almost every kind of character in her novels which she has come across in her own life. Deven's friend Murad and his lack of empathy is described by Desai as,

“Squeezed suffocatingly in Murad's embrace, Deven wondered what such a friendship really meant. Without sympathy, without compatibility, what was there under these jests, these

embraces? . . . It was really custom that was the lasting ingredient of friendship, nothing but long custom, and custom could be a well from which one never rose, a trap from which there was no release”. (175)

Desai has also delved deep in to the question of the position of minorities in the new India, and their culture and traditions as well as their ideal place in the national mainstream, and a diverse multicultural model for the Indian way of life.

Deven was disappointed and felt cheated by the unscrupulous shopkeeper Mr. Jain who sold him a second hand tape recorder and also with his close friend Murad. Deven’s agony has been described as follows:

“The tapes also were rotten, cheap. You sent me a technician who knows nothing about recording. It is nothing to do with the performance – or the artist. The artiste was the greatest – the best” (175)

Nur Shehjehanabadi forms a strange impression on Deven, who is a submissive man and also a faithful admirer of Nur’s. Deven did not expect the sudden turn of events, that would connect him forever with Nur and his family,

“... He had imagined he was taking Nur’s poetry in to safe custody, and not realized that if he was to be custodian of Nur’s genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too. This alliance could be considered an unendurable burden – or else a shining honour. Both demanded an equal strength...he was custodian of Nur’s very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure” (203-4).

In custody is one of the best books that Desai has written. It is memorable for its finest multicultural ethos, nuances and a sense of tremendously powerful emotion that tells of how the religion of humanity, mutual respect and harmony is greater than any form of bigotry and hatred. It also explores the contradictions between the old and the new, Hindu and Muslim identities, the struggle of supremacy between Hindi and Urdu, the complicated relationships between men and women and the critical as well as creative aspects of art.

Desai’s protagonists are not invincible ‘heroes’ and ‘heroines’. They are ordinary human beings with limitations, but with an extraordinary will-power, courage and determination. Anita Desai, in her later novels shows a noticeable shift from the female-centric stories to the male-centric ones; be it. *In Custody*, *The Zig Zag Way*, *Baumgartner’s Bombay* or *Journey to Ithaca*, that tell the stories of her male protagonists like Hugo Baumgartner, Nur Shahjehabadi, Deven, and Matteo. She has chronicled not only their journeys, dreams, expectations but also their utter disappointments and visions for a better future. Desai’s affection for Mexico and its people, has been enunciated in her recent short-stories and a novel based entirely in Mexico; *The Zig Zag Way*.

In her later novels Desai has also explored multiculturalism in a much more intense and profound manner, than her earlier novels, which were more about the female psyche and alienation. As Desai traveled and settled in other countries other than India, her understanding of multiculturalism grew and became more refined and clear. Her later novels are the exquisite collections of this experience and sum up her multicultural encounters around the globe, as she is now a perfect global citizen and in a league of her own.

Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* could also be attributed, to her own part German, multicultural heritage. The likeable old man, Mr. Baumgartner has to visit local teashops to get food for his many cats! One day at the Café Du Paris, a place that he visits often, he meets a well built German young man, of the new ways and order, a drug addict hippie, who ultimately destroys him and his life forever and change every thing by a ghastly act.

Desai has painted a remarkable portrait of Baumgartner, and it is a story of a terrible betrayal of trust. It showcases all the horrors of the twentieth century in a crystal clear manner. Mr. Baumgartner is both a survivor and a victim. The novel is set in Berlin, Venice, Calcutta and Bombay.

Baumgartner comes to India as a migrant and stays there till his death. India becomes his home, but even after fifty years there he is not accepted and considered as an 'Indian'. He is lonely and feels alienated, despite of meeting quite a few nice people. There is a fusion of the oriental and the occidental cultures in this novel, presented most authentically by Anita Desai. Mr. Baumgartner is compelled by Herr Pfuehl, a man from Hamburg who takes care of his father's business and lives in his house, after his father dies suddenly in a tragic suicide, to leave Germany, as being a Jewish man his life could be in serious danger. Hugo's life revolves around his mother as she is the most important person in his life. He says to his mother before leaving for India:

“ . . . And when I am in India, I will make a home for us. How will you like that ? I will have servants for you and drive away the snakes and bring you gold oranges.” (12)

Desai raises questions about rootlessness, identity and alienation. In Germany Hugo Baumgartner is an untouchable, an outcast because he is a Jew. When he lands in India amidst the horrifying events of the holocaust and before the chaos of the Second World War in Europe. He is lonely and displaced. His only relief and salvation is the memory of his mother, who is in Germany, but he remains optimistic about his future in India.

When he lands in Bombay, the heat and dust hits him hard and he is told by a man called Chimanlal, about business opportunities in Calcutta Hugo moves to Calcutta and likes it, he meets two German cabaret dancers, Lotte and Grisela and starts to adore them, as they all share their affection for Germany. The Second World War breaks out suddenly and Hugo is caught because he is a German and put in to prison, where he remains for six years. The tension and anger runs deep even in the prison, where there is an enmity between German Nazis and German Jews, although they are not even in Germany! Their racial prejudice and hatred is clearly evident even in a foreign country. The Jews are ironically imprisoned by the British because they are German citizens on one hand and are tortured by the Germans on the other as they believe that, the Jews have no right to either live in Germany or call themselves German.

Hugo's search for a home and identity is the central theme of this novel. After the war is over and he is free, he is tortured by the thoughts of his mother's demise, as his life seems to have no meaning without her existence. He loses his determination to survive and live in India, and does not even wants to step out of the prison, He cannot bring himself to celebrate over Germany's defeat as he loved his country very dearly. Times were bleak, the post- war trauma, the plausible cultural incompatibilities take a toll on Hugo Baumgartner's life; he is completely devastated like the "City of Joy" Calcutta where he takes shelter. The post war Calcutta on the threshold of a tragic partition some how symbolically represents his own terrible condition. He decides to leave Calcutta for Bombay, where he finds life quite tolerable. He takes an Indian nationality and works for Chimanlal, his friend and mentor in India. Even after his change of nationality, Mr. Baumgartner is still considered an outsider, which pains him deeply.

The novel is also historical in the sense that it portrays the Nazi Germany, the Second World War, struggle for Indian Independence, and contemporary India. Desai writes about India through the experiences and eyes of a German man who makes India his home. Desai describes in detail the trials and tribulations of a lovable and innocent Mr. Baumgartner and his companion and ex-cabaret dancer Lotte. They both share a common German heritage and a room in

Bombay. She is full of life, passion and energy. In Bombay she looks after Mr. Baumgartner and is a great asset to him and his existence. She is the mistress of a another man Kanti, and Desai has portrayed her getting ready for his arrival:

“Quick, Quick I would shampoo my hair, dress, go out and big something nice – a piece of pretty cloth – then run to the Durzee” (71)

Obviously there is a lot of cross-culture plurality in this novel. It talks about holocaust in Germany during the Second World War, Indian multiculturalism and to lesser and a stronger degree, Hugo is a very specific character, and we see all these themes and various cultural experiences, simply through his eyes.

The East-West encounter in *Baumgartner's Bombay* is quite successfully conveyed. Baumgartner's view of the East, through his own sense of history and personal experiences and adventures is rich and magnificent. All the counter-cultural influences on Hugo Baumgartner's life are vivid perceptions of his complete multicultural existence. His identity crisis and a sense of unbelonging, a learning across cultures, the pain of journeying across cultural realms and boundaries of being a foreigner, an alien and then recreating the self and making something meaningful of his life have been brilliantly presented by Desai. There is a constant journey between continents and cultures, ethics and centuries. This extraordinary novel explores with empathy and human sensitivity the life of a displaced man, who happens to be Jewish. It embraces and explores frontiers that a chaotic childhood, displaced youth and a tragic old-age and its melancholies open. Desai with her trademark grace, charm and dignity sketches the character of Hugo Baumgartner, and introduces her readers to his roller-coaster life and it's extraordinary struggles in Germany and India.

Desai describes Hugo Baumgartner's voyage to India as follows:

“He did so wrongly and found himself in the Rialto with its sudden flurry of sound and activity, crates of oranges standing about, stallholders shouting, women screaming, money ringing, and all around a profusion of design, of arabesques in stone and color, and for a moment or two he was fooled into believing that his wrong turning had led him straight into the East, into an eastern market, and he stood there, as entranced as he was alarmed. Venice was the East, and yet it was Europe too; it was that magic boundary where the two met and blended, and for those seven days Hugo had been a part of their union. He realized it only now: that during his constant wandering, his ceaseless walking, he had been drawing closer and closer to this discovery of that bewitched point where they became one land of which he felt himself the natural citizen.” (78-79)

Desai has shown brilliantly the psychological components to all of the Hugo's physical and circumstantial tragedies, his hybrid existence, which is slowly driving him to an existence of chaos and madness. Her subtle analysis of his dysfunctional existence and his uneventful, uneven, deformed, life, presents a dilemma which is completely unfathomable and undesirable.

Almost the entire wisdom of life with all its potential tragedies, as well as her open-ended non-judgmental philosophy of life has been reflected by Desai in *Baumgartner's Bombay*. She tells of different cultures and Baumgartner's love affair with India.

Desai shows that how the whole world from Europe to Asia, is in the midst of a revolutionary change, and how people's lives are altered, as a result of which, Mr. Baumgartner's experiences and struggles to adjust and come to terms with a completely different culture, than the one he grew up in, have been very well underlined and portrayed with sympathy and understanding. Mr. Baumgartner defies his destiny. The apparent strangeness, the new identity and a certain fate and even his monk like existence and evolution along with his

beautiful heart and generosity. This is Desai's most exquisite novels till date, which is not only liberating but also a fascinating example of multiculturalism. And he finds himself getting rejected even by the Gods.

Baumgartner is never accepted in India as an Indian, because he is considered an outsider, a foreigner all through his life. His only friend is Chimanlal, with whom he goes to the races, like his father in Germany and moreover it reminds him of his life in Berlin. After about five years, in Bombay, Hugo meets Lotte again ! who has a liking for stray cats and they bring meaning to his life as well, and he looks forward to their company at home. After his friend Chimanlal's death; Baumgartner stops working in his firm as Chimanlal's son has no respect for him. He becomes a recluse and avoids going out of his home.

He finds at Café De Paris, (where he goes to buy food for his cats and himself) Kurt, a German boy. Being a kind-hearted man he gives him shelter at his home, this unquestioning trust proves to be his own nemesis and speeds-up his untimely death.

This fatal mistake costs him his life, because he is murdered by Kurt for just a few silver cups, which he won at the race course at Mahalaxami. It is ironic as he gets murdered by a 'German Aryan' for being a 'German Jew' and not considered German enough to be respected! Lotte is the only one who feels bad terrible grieves for Mr. Baumgartner. She remembers him by his mother's cards and letters and that of his own. Desai has depicted Baumgartner's desperate search for belonging, intensely and sketched the sorrows of migrants most exactly and vividly as well as their tragic exiles.

Hugo Baumgartner's life has been inspired by a real life hero, Suketu Mehta says in his introduction to *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

"The twentieth century is a chronicle of mass exile. The advent of Nazis set an entire continent a foot. One of them was an elderly German who would prowl the streets of Bombay, collecting scraps for his cats. When he died, in the 1970's, the lawyer settling his affairs asked Anita Desai whose mother was a German who had voluntarily exiled herself for love – to look for a cache of letters the old man had left. Puzzling over the stamps on the letters, Desai realized that they were letters from a Jewish woman in a concentration camp in Germany to her son, and thus was born *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

The novel begins in the Bombay of the 1970s and flashes back to pre-war Berlin, and comes back around from there. It's a chronicle of murder foretold.

Baumgartner's story takes us through pre-war Berlin, Venice, Calcutta, an internment camp in the foothills of the Himalayas, post-war Calcutta, the interiors of India where he goes on business trips, and finally Bombay, where the firanghis are losing sway, and the natives taking over. The book is peopled by Jews and Germans, Bengalis and Gujratis, enemies and lovers - and a collection of stray cats Even if the Greek tragedy of the end is predictable, the novel carries you along because of Desai's mastery of the medium. You read not to get to the destination but for the sheer literary pleasure of the Journey. . . . This is a moral London Review of Books has described this novel as, "A book that puts to shame all the little epithets and pert clichés that praise may offer...

... It asks us to empathize with the kindly Chimanlal, also part of the old world, giving way to the new, in the form of his business – minded son. Kurt has his Indian counter part in Chimanlal's son, as coldly amoral as Kurt is ferociously immoral.

What Desai has done in *Baumgartner's Bombay* is detail in the entire blood – soaked twentieth century in one no very significant life. And in so doing, transform a shabby, kindly, star – crossed exile into a mythic hero, a martyr who dies for all our sins"2.

It is ironic that Hugo forgets his German tongue after living in India, for fifty years and neither does he learn English and Hindi properly. And his language is also as alien as he himself is considered, and he is still uncertain as to which language he must use. Mr. Baumgartner's bad experiences of the holocaust, racism inclination towards the Jews in Germany, racial proliferation, half – identity, his condemned ethnic and religious beliefs, his life and language, the suffering and tenacity of his small threatened culture and survival is absolutely heroic.

Hugo's nostalgia for 'home', all his struggles, his Indian exile, his terror of being discovered, his unwinnable struggle against his own life and destiny and his life and its dazzling adventures and challenges, have been amazingly well expressed by Desai, and resemble her family's multicultural existence, heritage and experiences. This is Desai's best tribute to the man, who was almost like a kind hearted saint, and sacrificed his life to redeem the sins of mankind. The novel explores the East-West encounters, alienation, men-women relationships, questions related to Jewish identity, Zionism and the various cultural variations of Indian cities like Bombay and Calcutta.

Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* is a portrayal of the hippie influx to India at its utmost peak. The novel follows the journey of Matteo in his pursuit of spiritual enlightenment in India. The novel has been divided into four chapters, and there is a prologue and an epilogue as well. The novel carries forward the tradition of the higher human consciousness, and principles of an enlightened humanism, that were earlier witnessed in Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* and *Clear Light of Day*. The prologue describes the early life of Matteo, the sensitive and dreamy protagonist of the novel. His dislike for mathematics and revulsion to normal practical life is described by Desai as:

"Matteo, raised on curves, rotundities and irregular lines, felt himself chilled by so much mathematical beauty, defeated by its logic". (17)

His spiritual search and quest for wisdom and knowledge brings him to India where his strength and grace are challenged in very difficult circumstances, but Matteo does not leave his search for truth. He travels to various ashrams and gurus across the length and breadth of India.

The novel traces the magnificent quest of Matteo and his wife Sophie, a remarkable couple who hail from a rich family in Italy, but give everything up in their search for the truth of their existence and purpose in life, they explore Hinduism for possible answers as well as the Indian culture. The novel is a brilliant portrayal of a beautiful era and describes the pinnacle of the "Hippy exodus" to India in the 1970's.

"In the summer of 1975, Sophie and Matteo, having first married to pacify their tearful and lamenting parents, left for India, dressed in identical blue jeans and T shirts and sports shoes, carrying identical rucksacks on their backs, as did so many of their generation in Europe. Only Sophie still wore her hair very short and Matteo was growing his long. They left on foot. In Matteo's pocket was the copy Fabian had left him of Hesse's *The Journey to the East*." (31)

Matteo comes to India in search of spirituality, peace and enlightenment, all the qualities that were strikingly lacking in the cut-throat materialistic culture of the West. He tells his wife Sophie who is also his companion in this eventful journey :

"... it is the spiritual experience for which you must search in India, nothing less."(36)

The search for an enlightened guru is as important, if not more, in their journey; Desai writes about Edward, a fellow seeker of spirituality who travels from guru to guru, in this eventful search they try to explore India to the utmost.

"Paire Edward was busily collecting saints as earlier travelers had collected gold, spices or shawls". (37)

The ‘devout’ Indian traders of religion and mysticism are also accurately portrayed by Desai :

“Our country is full of such people who have found enlightenment, I will take you to see others if you like”. (41)

Matteo and Sophie are also fooled and taken for a ride, sometimes literally! Once they are told:

“At Chowpatty beach itself there are saints” (41)

Sophie is bewildered to find so much diversity in India and a religious fervor incomparable to anywhere else in the whole world,

“This whole country, she reflected, was populated with devotees; the Gods could not have enough now they recruited them from abroad as well” (44)

Desai has revealed multiculturalism not only in India, but the entire world which is crystal-clear from the fact that Indian movie stars like Kabir Bedi had a global popularity and acted in the popular Italian television shows like Sandokan in the 1970’s, she writes :

“They went to the cinema and watched Kabir Bedi in Sandokan and laughed so loudly that some in the audience turned to stare and reprimand them” (47)

Desai has in her novel Journey to Ithaca made an attempt to portray the multidimensional image of immigrants whether from the East or the West. She also explains in this novel that how the real identity of human-beings is not a certain ethnic group, religion or culture to which they belong or adhere to, but their personalities, virtues and values.

The whole novel also encapsulates the experiences of a trance which is experienced by the curious spiritual seekers from the West, who come to learn the spiritual, meditative and religious aspects of the Hindu religion and culture which in spite of all their mechanical and material achievements, is lacking quite obviously in their capitalistic pursuits and the culture of money.

Desai has also portrayed the fact that even the easterners are quite practical, avaricious, calculating and deceitful and some of them just cheat the naive and vulnerable foreigners who come to India in the noble pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Desai also captures the pluralism and diversity of India, and especially in her later novels, that reflect the true multicultural essence of India more strikingly. They also deal with the hippie way of life and their experimentation with unusual drugs, and the visions, the psychological hallucinations and terrifying delusional outbreaks, as a result of too much drug use.

Desai’s perspective of multiculturalism discovers, and celebrates new heights of brilliance in this novel. Matteo and Laila are mocked for adopting alien culture amongst their friends and family, but they are determined and nonchalant in the face of all criticism and heart-breaking ordeals. Desai has portrayed a meeting of the West and the East and their cultures in this extraordinary novel. She tells of how Matteo for discovering bliss and mystic depths of spiritualism and to attain nirvana, embraces simplicity and relinquishes all his worldly possessions. His story is interwoven with Laila’s (The Mother) quest for understanding herself through Hinduism inspite of being a Muslim. They focus on the higher self and the concept of cosmic karma to purify their souls. The enchanting fascination which Matteo has for India, is reflected in his determination to look for a guru who can enlighten him spirituality:

“ . . . ‘I want to know why we are here?

‘I told you to find India, to understand

India, and mystery that is at the heart of India’ (57)

And Sophie gives in to her husband’s desire, for living in India:

“ . . . She herself only half-listened, and when one of them began to give a discourse on the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo or to explain the creed of the Bhagavad Gita as expounded by Yogi Paramahansa, she found her self dipping lower in to the haze of marijuana : She preferred the comfort of ignorance.” (62)

The adventurous element of traveling the world and understanding the Hindu spiritual nuances, is interwoven with the theme that all humans are one family and their search for meaning in their lives is universal. There are undercurrents of subtle humor as well in this otherwise dark, tragic novel:

“As they travelled relentlessly through the great dark plain that seemed to have no end, Sophie heard Matteo muttering to himself in horror. ‘The light’s gone - I can’t see- I’m blind -’

“‘Fool’, Sophie said to him shortly It’s the night and we are out on the land where there are no lights to see.” (73)

And later when Sophie is leaving for Europe:

“An air hostess in the guise of a butterfly came fluttering up the aisle to ask solicitously, ‘Are you Okay? . . .’ (151)

Desai shows in *Journey to Ithaca* the special relationship that is shared by “The Mother” and Matteo, one of mutual affection, faith, mutual quest for understanding and attaining the divine, and reverence on Matteo’s part for “The Mother”. Like Buddha who left his palace in Kapilavastu in search for a higher truth, Matteo leaves his home to search for the same divine inspiration. Sophie is also portrayed as a strong female who refuses to accept the stereotypical concept of organized Christianity:

“No, I did not leave India and all its superstitions and rituals to come here and submit to the tribal rites of Europe.” (152)

Meanwhile Sophie is back in Italy, leaving Matteo in “The Mother’s” ashram. She also unsuccessfully tries to date other men who are influenced by her:

“ . . . She met the young man Paolo who found this older woman quite fascinating, that she was wealthy, bore a distinguished name, dressed like a poor student, used no make-up had a plain face and hair that she cut herself, and had lived in India, made her the opposite of all the young women he knew who were poor, with unknown names, dressed like mannequins were deeply attached to the big cities of the west and wished only to travel to America”. (154)

Desai has also up horded the sanctity of marriage in *Journey to Ithaca* Sophie cannot imagine to be with any one else after being with Matteo.

Although younger men get attracted to her, and she to them for a while. She cannot see any one else stepping to Matteo’s shoes.

Desai describes “The Mother” as follows:

“They said She is a Muslim and a foreigner she is polluting our Ashram. The Master told them God is one and he is everywhere, in the temple an the mosque. He recited to us the verses written by Kabir – you know our greet poet, Kabir ? He was a simple weaver, of the Julaha caste, and of a Muslim family. But he lived in the holy city of Benares and he wrote songs to Rama. The Master made us learn these songs and sing them to purify our hearts of hatred and bed thoughts.” Mother’s past is often used to humiliate and harass her but her critics but in spite of all these petty allegations about religion and her past life she stresses on peace and ultimate salvation.

Matteo is told by “The Mother”:

“You are not absorbed in family life, Matteo. I have only to look at your pure and shinning face to know it is not so. No, Matteo. You are like the lotus that blooms in the ponds

and lakes of India. Your roots may be in the mud but your petals are pure, the water does not touch them and the mud does not stain them. Be always like that lotus flower, she murmured, ‘Clean and pure’...

Matteo, his heart thudding and bounding with joy at her words, knew enough not to repeat them to Sophie...” (138)

Sophie cannot stand the Mother and thinks that she is brainwashing her husband Matteo, who wants to slowly give up all the attachment for family life and concentrate on his own spiritual sanctity and that affects and shocks his wife greatly who expects him to take responsibility and return to Europe and give up his quixotic adventures ! even though he captures the hearts of all the inmates of the ashram and especially the Mother.

Desai has created a perfect novel and some critics consider it as her best India of the 1970’s has been so well portrayed by her and along with that the whole world she has used varied emotive imaginations and has been successful in creating a magical effect on her readers; it feels like witnessing and understanding a great event like the hippie influx to India not only in the history of India but also history of the world, through the life of Matteo, the mother shopping and so many other characters we witness the Indian culture through the eyes of Matteo and Sophie and even “The Mother”. It is also a religious and spiritual journey of these individuals in search of truth but most importantly in the discovery of their own, being and self and inner their revelations are absolutely mesmerizing, not only for them but also for the readers.

Journey to Ithaca has several multicultural aspects. It depicts the Egyptian culture, the European culture, American culture, Italian family values, bonding and their finer cultural nuances. The novel begins with Cavafy’s poem ‘Ithaca’; translated by Race Dolmen. India is depicted as the exotic “Ithaca”. It is also the portrayal of the personal journeys of Matteo and Laila in search of the questions, to which they could not find any answers within their own countries cultures and religions. The novel also depicts the freedom inherent in the Hindu culture or Sanatana Dharma, which is based on freedom of self and ‘Sarva Dharma Sambhava’ or accepting the multiplicity of faiths and respecting all religion alike as opposed to the organized orthodox religions, that revolve around books and label everyone who does not agree with them intolerantly as infidels’ or heathens; These are the kinds of orthodoxy, against which both Matteo and Laila revolt. The novel also response the principle of “Sanatana Dharma”, that is the ultimate path for all living beings primarily based on the nature of the soul.

“Her life with Matteo had spoilt her for life with men like this Paolo; it was no longer possible. The day he suggested they travel together to India “We could visit your husband at the ashram, give him a surprise think of it!” — She spat at him, ‘You? You are not fit to even enter his presence. He is a god—” (155)

Journey to Ithaca sketches the journey and past life of “The Mother”. Sophie finds out her origins and her travails in various parts of the world she finds out that “The Mother” was called Laila and was a Muslim who after reading about Hinduism and the Indian dance troupe in France, was so moved that she joined them and learnt Indian dance from Krishna ji the maestro. Although Laila’s parents lived in Alexandria in Egypt, she takes permission from her aunt to join the dance Troup which resembles the touring dance Troup of Uday Shankar the famous brother of the Sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar. Her fascination for Indian is described as follows:

“... but it was to the paintings of the blue and the dancing maiden that Laila returned again and again. . .” (201) and “. . .she read Edwin Arnold’s Light of Asia, Pierre Loti’s L’ Inde, Kalidasa’s Sakuntala, went through great religions of the world. Max Muller’s sacred books of the East, Vivekananda’s Raja Yoga the Bhagvad Gita, Tagores’s The Gardener and Gitanjali -

pouncing on every reference to Krishna to Radha. . . and yet clinging secretly to the name she had first chosen : Lila of Krishna Lila, because that contained the first impulse, the one that led the way. (212)

She described herself as the seeker of truth and had an apparent dislike for all orthodox religions, as to her they were “the repositories of ignorance and suppression”.

She is disgusted by the blatant commercialization of the Indian art in new York in the 1920’s. by the troupe of Krishna ji and appalled by the American media:

“New Jersey Advocate: ‘Sensational Dances by Barefoot Dancers from Himalayas in New Jersey.’ ” (263)

““Nautch Dancers seen Leaving Theater in Black Chevy — whose?” ” (262) “Peacock Finds Perch in New York (262).

Laila travels from Paris to Venice in Italy and then to New York and finally India the land of her dreams the land of Shiva and Parvati, of Radha and Krishna, that enchanted and beckoned her.

“. . . India has always been her home. She has never been there, you are right, but it is where her soul was born. Her soul is waiting for her in India’ ”. (272).

Laila is bewildered to find that landing in Bombay is a major disappointment the mysteriousness of India is not manifested in its metropolitan cities of India Laila observes that: “The world is as much with me here as in New York or Venice or Paris. I though we had left it behind when we sailed from America and that once on Indian soil we would dwell in a temple of devotion. But it is not so . . .” Finally Laila escapes from the claustrophobia of Bombay takes shelter in Guruji’s ashram up in the northern hills, which she transforms in to a haven of blissfulness and spirituality even after bearing all the insults and taunts about being a ‘foreigner’, a ‘Muslim’ and a ‘nautch girl’. Her death terribly shakes Matteo and he stops eating or drinking and “weeps like a child all he wants is peace and left for the north, where the mother received enlightenment No one could stop him.” (304)

The novel ends with an “Epilogue” and Matteo’s son Giacomo, who has a vision of his father dressed in white clothes and calling his name, but speaking a foreign language which he does not understands. Little Gialomo observes that his father looks like Jesus Christ, which is quite ironic and melancholic. Desai does not reveals whether this tragic event is a result of Matteo attaining a perfect state of yogic blissfulness or Matteo’s meeting with his son after his death. Sophie is left alone once again in her agony, a sense of spiritual longing and loneliness which she has come across as a result of her encounter with so many different cultures. Desai has successfully explained the Indian philosophical culture with extreme expertise and it is one of her best works till date.

Anita Desai *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), Describes the tragedy of Uma, a spinster, who is a plain and under confident and feels trapped at home, dominated by her over bearing parents and their dictates in the name of tradition and family honour. She is unlike her younger sister Aruna, who brings a perfect marriage and their brother Arun, a prodigal son, studying in America, Uma feels her parents have been disappointed in her and she has been much less than their expectation. On the other hand, across the world in Massachusetts (The United States of America) Arun’s life with the Patton family (he is their paying guest) is confusing and bewildering. In absurd alien surroundings, he feels absolutely out of place in this land of plenty. There is plenty of freedom, plenty of self indulgence, and most of all it is the land of opportunities and dreams, Desai’s description of the contrast between the two world is amazing, fascinating and awe inspiring. It is also a reflection of her own personal experiences that she

gathered by both living in India and in the United States. It is sensitive and captures the essence of an immigrant mindset in a multicultural haven like America.

This novel has described marginal psyche, alienation and dislocation both within and outside one's home in a simply outstanding way. The way Desai has dealt with the complex concepts of despair, rootlessness and spiritualism shows her own way of handling tremendous moral, social and psychological dilemmas. Her globalized scenarios and multi cultural opinions are a reflection of her own growth as a citizen of the world. Her frequently travels almost all over the world provided her with insights and experiences which could be found all over her novels.

Uma, being the oldest daughter feels guilty for being a burden on her parents. She spends her days looking after the house, as she hails from a stereotypical provincial family with very conservative mindset. She also looks after her parents, and feels that is just passing her by she has never thought about life away from home and working outside her house, (which incidentally is the center of her existence and forte) never occurs to her. She was some times easier to escape her distraught situation. Desai describes this thought as the follows:

“. . . A CAREER. Leaving home. Living alone. These troubling, secret possibilities how entered Uma's mind, the idea; run away escape. But Uma could not visualize escape in the form of a career. What was a career ? She had no idea" (131)

The title of the novel *Fasting, Feasting* is itself suggestive and symbolic. It presents a contrast of cultures, apparently the juxtaposition of the mysterious East and the materialistic West. It also presents a curious identical similarity between vibrant small town India and a Rich American suburb, both as far as the family conflicts are concerned and also an individual's quest for his or her own identity, independence and the grounds realities that stare them in the face, are taken in account. It is definitely not a mainstream novel, but a rich, subtle story in which the cultural intricacies of the East and the West form an important background. The suffering of women like Uma in India and Mrs. Patton or Melanie also strike a chord, with the readers universally.

The East–West encounter is beautifully portrayed by Desai, the amazing cross cultural encounters of Arun in the United States of America have been astutely described by Desai She is deeply perceptive and sensitively sketches the prudence and wisdom of Arun, while he conducts himself all alone in a foreign land, where he barely knows anything but nonetheless tries to come to terms with all his new - found experiences that regulate his life in America.

Desai makes intense enquires about the immigrant experiences, in her novels. The protagonists are not only alienated from themselves but also their immediate surrounding and even their families. The isolation and humiliation of her characters is so obvious and well portrayed, that it just strikes a chord. Her protagonists are mainly outsiders who are consumed by indecisiveness about to their families or to themselves. The claustrophobia which grips them is brought out brilliantly by Desai. Her exceptionally unique cultural heritage, that happens to be dual, gives her the vision of putting in to words her own sublime, subtle and banal, every day experiences with different kinds of people who come in to contact with her characters, are self centered misfits, but nonetheless deserving of compassion and under standing.

On the other hand, Uma's brother Arun faces a dilemma of his own, far away from the country he has been born and brought up; for the first time the issues of relatedness, home sickness of self and exile. Arun has come to America for his higher studies and lives in Massachusetts, (where Desai herself spent considerable number of years at the M.I.T.) he has to stay with the dysfunctional Patton family for sometime which is all American and all white.

Arun enjoys the feeling of absolute anonymity in a foreign land, he is happy to be ultimately free from the shackles of family expectations, relatives and his own duties as a son. On the contrary his humiliation and fear in an alien land. Although, he spends just three months with the pattons, he vividly and profoundly experiences the life in an American suburb. The two distinguished cultures, which are experienced by him during his stay. The struggle to just survive in America on one hand and the life, which he literally takes for granted in India, bring him close to reality and self realization. It is definitely a contrast of the two-lifestyles, cultures and philosophies.

Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is a saga of displacement, dislocation, desertion and a feeling of separation from the rest, both within India and outside. The cross cultural dialogues provide a mutual understanding and respect for each other's culture, as is the case with Arun and Mrs. Patton, who try to understand and sympathies with each other and their mutual affection enhance their bonding irrespective of their backgrounds.

Arun's encounter with the Pattons, their culture and his judgment and comparison of that culture against his own, creates an enlightening awareness for him.

For instance, the interesting cultural interactions between Arun and the Pattons, have been described by Desai as following :

“... ‘This here should be just right for you, Red, he jollies the nervous new comer to his congregation, not yet saved but surely on his way. Arun has made the mistake of telling the Pattons’ once that his name means red in Hindi, and Mr. Patton has seized upon this as a good joke, particularly in conjunction with his son's name, Rod, fortunately Arun has not elaborated that it means, specifically the red sky at sunrise or Mr. Patton might now be calling him dawn.” (165-66).

Even in the United States, the Indian identity of Arun is always at the fore at the Pattons, he is asked questions about his religion, beliefs, and traditional customs, which surprises and amuses them greatly. Apparently, Arun is extremely uncomfortable disclosing his opinions to people he barely knew or understood. He and his cultural ethnic realm are questioned and his sense of identity goes for a toss, and a feeling of powerlessness consumes him, for away from home. Although he tries to be at his best and answer all the questions about his culture and religions for instance at the Patton's he is told :

“ ‘Ahroon explained it all to us, clear – you know, about the Hindoo religion, and the cows —’

Mr. Patton gives his head a shake sadly disappointed in such moral feel lenses and turns the slab of meat over and over. ‘Yeah, how they let them out on the streets because they can't kill ‘em and don't know what to do with I could show ‘em. A cow is a cow. And good red meat as for as I'm concerned.’ (166).

The American in Mr. Patton does not understand that how a ‘real’ man can survive on vegetables, he considers it quite unmanly and unreal as well, and talks how much strength the flesh of blood dripping slaughtered animals could provide, as according to him a person has to almost wage a battle whether it's work or everyday living, and for that they need real energy that vegetarian food could never provide.

The cultural dissimilarities are striking but Desai tries to say that beyond the superficial differences there is something similar that binds all the cultures in spite of their glaring differences, which could eventually prove to be absolutely artificial.

There is a sense of loss, a sense of loneliness and displacement that Arun feels in an alien culture initially. The technologically advanced West presented it's own unfamiliar dynamics to him. The alienation of Arun is depicted as follows :

“... The emptiness of Arun's weekends would be punctuated by sudden eruptions of music from enormous pieces of sound equipment set up or transported across the campus. These were like voices shouting out of another world, another civilisation ...” (170)

Despite all the contradictions, there is a reconciliation and agreement on the basic principles of human living and a fundamental cultural co-existence. The West's interpretation of India and likewise that of the immigrants' interpretations of the country of their dreams, have been clearly brought out by Desai in Fasting, Feasting.

Arun is reluctant to mix with the other Indian boys of his college, as this is a phase of his life where he has an aversion to too much social interactions and intimacy. Arun's plight is described as thus :

“He resisted even the overtures made by his own country men who had formed a small ghetto on the thirteenth floor of the dorm where they could concoct the foods that they longed for over an illegal hot plate and sing to the tapes of music that were their most precious possession from home. Arun always managed to have a test to prepare for when they invited him to join them for a meal they had made, and a Bombay film they had found at the local video store” (171).

Arun is wary of the threat to his freedom and individuality, by the other Indian boys and their tendency to form groups. He is rather willing to live in a self-inflicted, anti social solitary confinement than to surrender his individuality, to a trap which he feels he has escaped, in the form of his family, relatives and friends in India. He does not want to get in America in to the mayhem of torturous friendly and familial relationships and expectations again.

Arun's first flushes of freedom, make him happy for a while, all this freedom for himself in the land of license, and plenty is very exciting for him.

“It was the first time in his life away from home, away from Mama Papa, his sisters, the neighbourhood of old bungalow's, dusty gardens and straggling hedges where he had grown up, the only town he had ever known; he had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs requests, ties, responsibilities, commitments. He was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country. (172)

This exhilaration of being young is however short-lived and away from the traps of familial control at home.

Arun cooks his own meals for the first times in his life ! away from home he realizes the importance of food in his existence, which he had been almost taking for granted, in India !

Mrs. Patton is sympathetic and tells him :

“... ‘you'll be wanting your own kind of food, I'm sure, and I know I won't be able to provide that, my sister's written and told me how different your food is from ours. She's lived there oh, twenty years or more, and writes me these amazing letters. My, I'm amazed by what she tells me, I am India-gee!’ ”(177).

Mrs. Patton's love for vegetarianism and the influence of her sister who has lived in India, for many years is also reflected in these lines:

“My sister told me many Indians were vegetarians. I've always wanted to be one myself. I've always hated eating meat-oh, that red, raw stuff, the smell of it! I've always, always disliked it- but never could – never knew how- you know, my family wouldn't have liked it! (179)

Desai also portrays how human nature is identical all over the world and especially the feelings of all the mothers', be it Arun's mother or Mrs Patton,

"She smiles a bright plastic copy of a mother smile that Arun remembers from another world and another time . . ." (194)

In America, Arun cooks for himself for the first time ever in his life. His admiration for the fast paced American industrial, capitalist and technological advancement is expressed by Desai in the following words:

"The cars speed away like metal darts aimed into space by missile launchers in the towns they leave behind. . . . All along the highway there will be signs, shelter, food, gas stations, motorist's aid call boxes. Howard Johns on motels-everything for the convenience of motorists, the owners of the dream machines. Their passage will be easy, their destinations infinite . . . the inheritors of the pioneers dream of the endlessly postponed and endlessly golden West". (201)

Arun also realize the importance of the valuable philosophy of living and cultivating a balance in one's life, when he witnesses the American life, from close quarters ". . .one can't tell what is more dangerous in this country, the pursuit of health or of sickness" (205)

The realization of truth dawns on Arun and he realizes that human nature, emotions, and reactions to events are almost always same, all over the world, be it the lands of plenty in the West with all its materialistic trappings or the lands of sacrifice and salvation in the East. He is embarrassed after watching Mrs. Patton sunbathe in summer. It is something not done according to his cultural conditioning, and is quite shocking and distressing for him.

Arun is also a witness to the neuroses of Melanie, her bulimia, and her dysfunctional relationship with her family, looking at the Pattons, he thinks;

"How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks where so much is given, where there is both license and plenty.

But what is plenty? What is not? Can one tell the difference?" (214)

Mr. Patton does not appreciate his wife's interest in things like numerology, gemology, Karmic lessons, which he finds opposed to his own cultural conditioning and ideas, like the rest of their family. Desai successfully creates in this novel the cross-cultural interactions and an existentialist theme where there are no exact systems of values, either social or moral, nor strictly religious or cultural. She just describes the self-realization and discovery of Arun who finds himself in a strange and alien culture and a world of unlimited freedom, and a self indulgence which is incomparable to anything that he witnessed or experienced before in his own country.

Desai's *The Zig Zag Way* (2004) shows her intense passion and perspectives on the inevitable questions of identity and culture. Her latest novel is set in Mexico where she has lived and created a part of this novel which inhabits a kind of a divine consciousness. The Mexican landscape has a life of its own with all its ancient history, mythology and culture just like India. The overwhelming quest of an American's adventurous spirit and spiritual quest has been highlighted magnificently in this novel. This is a story of Eric, a young American, who is a historian and has just completed graduate school, and is quite chaotic about his future life and career choices. He follows his girl friend, Em, who travels to Yucatan in Mexico for her research work. Gradually, he starts to search for his own roots there, in an old mining town, where his fore father's, in an old mining town where his forefathers, the young Cornish miners worked, a hundred years ago. He comes to know about and in contact with Dona Vera widow of a miner, who made a fortune. Don`a Vera has an interesting, colourful European past with a mysterious reputation. Eric looks for the story of his grandparents, and along with that Desai tells the tragic story of a young English girl, who is buried on a Mexican hillside. The beauty of the novel and

its mystery is revealed and unfolded at the feast of the “Day of the Dead” when the local people pray to and commemorate their departed. The zig zag roads of these various lives come together, fusing the past and the present in a moment of an unfolding, all powerful revelation.

Desai’s *The Zig Zag Way* is the most vivid reflection of R.L. Stevenson’s famous lines “There are no foreign lands. It is the traveler only who is foreign”

The historical significance of the events, that shaped and altered a nations history are described in graphic detail. Eric, a graduate student from America is researching and writing a thesis on the immigration patterns, and wants to follow his girlfriend Em to Mexico, who rebukes him and says;

“... 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”. (15)

Eric is as bewildered and charmed by Mexico on arrival, as his forefathers, who must have had similar emotions hundreds of years back. Which means that, the inner attitude is more important in our sustenance in any clime than even the various outer aspects.

“... Eric found himself distracted by everything in the airport. . . the arrivals hall which was swamped by more people with black hair and brown skin that he had ever encountered before, families embracing and weeping and laughing as if they lived their lives on the level of grand opera”. (24)

Which was, so similar to his, the only difference being their different modes of arrival:

Desai describes how Eric is pleasantly surprise to see the vibrant, and colorful Mexican culture.

“... In Mexico all foreigners took to dressing flamboyantly . . . and to wearing a great deal of elaborate Jewellery” (29). The multicultural Mexican culture reflected in Dona Vera’s speech is described as,

“... This took Eric several minutes and then the mixture of 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”. (31)

Desai has a philosophical view on migration and human adjustment to it, and their destinies. Desai describes it as follows:

“... 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 new beginning in a New World”. (34)

The cultural influences of India are always reflected in Anita Desai’s novels no matter where they are based. For instance,

“... Dona Vera was standing on solid ground dressed in Jodhpurs and boots. . .” (44)

Here Dona Vera is described as dressed in ‘Jodhpurs’ (her Indian influence can be seen clearly as the word is derived from a town in the Indian state of Rajasthan, and means loose fitting pants, worn by the Indian Royalty while playing polo).

Desai’s *The Zig Zag Way* is also her tribute to multiculturalism, about an American man, whose forefather’s were Cornish miners and come from Cornwall in England, to take up exploration of mines in Mexico which was historically influenced by Spain and shared a common language, i.e. Spanish. Desai has created this magnificent novel deriving in part from her own life, as she was born and bred in India, and taught creative writing the United States, (in Massachusetts) like Eric who is a writer and a scholar.

Her eternal imagination takes us to Mexico, deep into the lives of the Cornish immigrants including Eric's grandparents and the native of the mountains of Sierra Madre, in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. The Huichol Indians who were considered pagans are simply adored by Dona Vera, and she always condemned the protestant missionaries who arrived from the United States from states like Kansas, Iowa and Ohio, with all the money, food, clothing and medicines and enlured almost all the native tribes including the Huichol, in order to convert them to Christianity. (Just like in India, where the indigenous tribes have been similarly tempted and converted to Christianity since many decades.)

Eric remembers his grandparents whose names were David Rowse and Betty Jennings who emigrated and got married from Cornwall in England who make it big in Mexico, and hope to live happily and contentedly for the rest of their lives. But due to the political scenario, there were risks involved in living there, and so Betty who was pregnant had to be sent away. In the midst of this danger Betty dies, after giving birth to an infant son. The novel is a beautiful unfolding of this theme.

Desai is incapable of creating anything mediocre and ordinary. *The Zig Zag Way* and its sensitive narrative has charm, and a kind of prose which carries Anita Desai's natural poise and restraint as well as a meandering description of immigrants, family, mutual affection joy loyalty, passion and duty. The whole theme gradually unfolds with strong currents of multiculturalism, timelessness and truth. Immigration and hope for a better new life has been a recurring theme in the novels of Anita Desai. In *The Zig Zag Way* Desai digs diligently the tumultuous, and devastating times in the midst of overpowering circumstances beside the difficult life of the miners in Mexico, during the century.

The dangerous effects of the American financial fiasco and the tragic consequences of casino capitalism which has lead inevitably to chaos and destruction at present, also find a reflection in this novel.

In a way the greed and destruction of Mexico, that Dona Vera abhors, could also be equated to the present times, where neo-colonialism and neo capitalism have once again raised their ugly heads for instance could be equated to the destructions of Mexico by the colonialists some two hundred years back.

The Zig Zag Way is divided into four parts Part I is called 'Eric Arrives' Part II 'Vera Stays', Part III 'Betty Departs' and Part IV 'La Noche de los Muertos'. Each of these sections vividly explains the unfolding of the story in a crystal clear manner. It is the story of Eric and the rediscovery of his roots, amidst chaos and pain.

Anita Desai has written this story like a soothsayer, with an astonishing, exquisite and elaborate landscape which is both deadly and enchanting Mexico has been portrayed as a country of the million contradictions dreams and hopes, for its original inhabitants and the millions of people who made it their home. *The Zig Zag Way* is also a poignant portrayal of a fast changing culture and a rapidly evolving and altering social landscape at the turn of the nineteenth century. Desai has beautifully tried to unravel the tangled roots of history of the erstwhile colonial Mexico, very much like India. Mexico, like India's has always been a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual country which has enchanted countless people. Both Mexico and India reeled under Spanish and British domination respectively for more than two hundred years.

Desai feels like she does not recognize today's India and forays into an entirely new country where she is more than not often mistaken for a Mexican. Desai's characters are filled with self-incriminating remorse which engulfs them and others like a flood. The novel has supernatural elements and a sort of a magic realism as well; which is probably the first time that

Desai has used them in her writings. It is very rare, new and remarkable for her, and she seems to have been inspired by Mexican history and culture, where spirits, ghosts, nature worship, supernatural and mythical stories find a very important place.

“ . . . It was many years before they had a child – as if they had been intimidated and discouraged by the large numbers all around them, the brothers being married and with numerous progeny housed in cottages they had built in the family yard by the sea – and when Eric was born, Madeleine proved as protective of him as of the stranger she had married. They both personified for her the outside world that she herself had never stepped into – except on the one visit back to Cornwall that she and Paul undertook when they left Eric with his grandfather in the pebble – dashed cottage by the sea where he played with a toy train filled with sparkling flakes of ore till his step-grandmother, entering the room with a teapot under a cosy, said, ‘Now don’t go filling his head with all that nonsense.

It was the only time Davey Rowse was known to have spoken to anyone of the mines in Mexico where he had once worked, and it was his grandson Eric’s head that he buried a flake of golden nonsense that he had once found in Mexico’s mountains.” (154)

Desai has spanned this beautiful story across three generations. It is after the death of Betty, who is the wife of Eric’s grandfather Davey Rowse and his grandmother. Betty’s death is a terrible tragedy and shock for her husband and everyone in the family and affects them intensely. The legacy of Mexico is unforgettable no matter how much Davey Rowse tries to forget about it. He finally speaks about his days there as if in a flashback, to none other than his little grandson Eric when his parents leave him with his grandparents. Everyone comes back to England but the memories of Mexico are too incredible to leave behind, for Davey Rowse:

Multiculturalism has always been an inevitable part of each of Desai’s novels, particularly her later ones that deal with pain as well as passion. The essence of Desai’s creative quest is that, essentially cultures need to have a dialogue with each other, instead of the darkness and seclusion that surrounds humanity due to a lack of it. Desai has opined that the Mexicans, like Indians are the most remarkable people, who are victims of the cruel blows of their destined dilemmas. Desai like Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth has described the western world at its most bleakest and explored its sinister, morbid and mystical aspects. This view point has also enabled us to witness and contrast it with our own culture and from an eastern perspective.

The multi-dimensional realities and perspectives of both the East and the West have been successfully brought in a myriad fusion of harmony by Desai in *The Zig Zag Way*.

On the ‘de los Muertos’ or the day of the dead, every mysterious secret unfolds. Eric meets Roderigo who tells him about the true nature and the many pretensions of Dona Vera, whom he considers to be a very clever and dishonest witch. Eric is shocked to hear that Dona Vera made her living as a showgirl and escort. in the various bars and clubs in Europe after which she migrated to Mexico. Later on she cleverly marries into one of the richest mining families in Mexico. She as a rich widow takes to philanthropy later on, she is described by the ghost of Roderigo as follows:

“ . . . ‘The one and only,’ he said. ‘Still playing the queen there, I’m sure. The Queen of the Sierra! What a farce.’ . . . ‘I could tell you some things 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)

Eric, at last, meets his grandmother Betty, who waits during this festival of the dead, for her family members every year. She is the same vivacious and beautiful girl, as she was at the

time of her death, although her clothes are tattered now, she has not lost her charm. This meeting is described by Desai as follows:

“A young woman was descending it, with such ease and speed it was as though she did not notice the stones in her way, they were not impediments to her Seeing Eric standing by the low wall that ringed the cemetery, she lifted her hand, holding a small bunch of gray leaves and pale flowers, and to his amazement, waved to him. He could not imagine why she acknowledged him or who she might be or why she was there, but his mind had ceased to pose questions, they were all obliterated by the wave of her hand and the pure scent of the flowers.

‘I found them by the path,’ she said lightly, conversationally, as if continuing a dialogue that they had already begun. . . . ‘And you – you’re Paul, aren’t you? I thought you might come’ ‘No’, he told her sadly, ‘I’m not Paul. Paul is my father. I’m Eric, his son.’

She gave no indication she had heard or understood. Stroking the silvery gray leaves of nosegay in her head, she said, almost shyly, ‘You are just as 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 come from somewhere else. Have you heard that?’

‘Yes,’ Eric admitted ‘I think, I think they may have come from Spain – or somewhere?’

She was not too concerned with accuracy. ‘Everyone comes from somewhere else,’ she said, nodding towards the shifting, moving shapes. . . . ‘like us, from Cornwall. Such a long way to come? ‘Quite a Journey,’ ‘And ending here,’ she said, tapping the wall she sat on so lightly.” (175-77)

After a while, Eric hears the church bells that begin to ring incessantly, probably in order to call the dead back to their graves. He looks for Betty, but she is nowhere to be seen. It is a mysterious event, which forms the most important and melancholic note of this novel and also reconciles us to the fact of life after death. Mexicans and Indians similarly hold prayers for their ancestors who have left them, but it is believed that on this day, they visit their loved ones in the form of spirits and are offered the things of their choice; food, wine, clothes, flowers; everything that they liked when they were alive. Eric’s chance meeting with his grandmother is the most amazing and marvelous end to *The Zig Zag Way*.

Desai in order to create this mysterious and wonderful novel, took an intensive research into the long forgotten historical past of the amazing Mexico of its vibrant colours and magnificent history. She made a deep study of its colonial past and gave it a brilliant colour in her own creations.

She has also envisioned the western colonial past of Mexico as a backdrop to *The Zig Zag Way* and the country itself with the attitude, and intensively creative mind of an oriental philosopher, which reflects the amazing and outstandingly brilliant attempt of her multicultural mindset and a mesmerizing narrative conviction. Her notions and nuances are derived both from the East and the West, spanning almost all the continents. Her added multicultural advantage gives her the best perspectives on the East as well as the West. *The Zig Zag Way* is the most profound odyssey of multiculturalism created by Desai, and it is the best creative tribute which this versatile writer could offer to the country that she adores and appreciates for its mighty heart and hospitality, and its rich, vibrant and alluring cultural heritage. *The Zig Zag Way* like Mexico is ever enduring and majestic and definitely an extraordinary novel and it also highlights the supernatural, religious and secular elements that are profoundly explored by Desai.

Desai has thus, in her later novels dealt much more vividly and profoundly explored the various themes and influences of multiculturalism. Her later novels resonate with her own growth, not just personal but one which also symbolizes her multicultural legacy and leanings. Her vignettes chronicle her cross-cultural interactions. She tells of the true lives of people who experience estrangement and cultural chaos. Her novels are descriptive and symbolic, and Desai never tries to defend one point of view or another. She simply tells her stories honestly, whether they are about uprooting, coping, chaos or contradictions. Her poised portrayals of fragile and mysterious ordinary persons, and their incredible, pristine characters are indeed courageous. Her own experiences give her readers a whole new perspective on multiculturalism.

Her novels are exceptional, intriguing and graceful, timeless treasures. They give us a glittering glimpse of the spectacular and breathtaking workings of the human psyche. The sights and sounds of the multicultural India are described with absolute heart and soul. Desai's own multicultural experiences give her readers, a whole new level of respect for the persons, who go abroad and courageously fight against racism, and for their basic human rights, and endure all kinds of injustices, which are done to them, and because of which their lives change forever.

Her part- German heritage helped her to explore India as an 'outsider' later on which is well reflected in her later novels. Desai is a multiethnic and multi-talented creator of multicultural stories. Her subtle, rich, intense, and varied portrayals of human nature and surroundings make her unique.

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