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Imagining Co-existence in the Anthropocene: An Ecocritical Study of Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*

Dr. Rajiv Katoch
Associate Professor, Department of English, GDC Akhnoor, J&K, India
Dr. Pardeep Kumar
Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu, India
Gagandeep Singh Sasan
Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu, India

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Abstract

The present-day world is human centric which is characterized by various anthropogenic activities carried out by humans for their personal benefits. Some of these activities include reckless mining, environmental exploitation and geological degradation etc that not only harm the nature but the humans as well. This research paper analyses the impacts of mining on nature and humans through an eco-critical lens. Anita Desai's novel The Zigzag Way unfolds the story of Eric (the protagonist) who travels to Mexico and discovers how mining has uprooted the families of others and several indigenous communities. The paper thus, exposes the truth behind mining industry responsible for damaging mountains, poisoning lands and affecting the lives of miners drastically. It critiques human and biological devastation which is carried out by the anthropogenic expansion and development, causing humans to suffer in the end. The paper also studies the character of Dona Vera, a mine owner to highlight the importance of co-existence between nature and humans, and urge men to live in harmony with the nature by minimizing exploitative tendencies against it.

Keywords: Mining, Anthropocene, Chthulucene, Coexistence, Ecocriticism

Introduction:

The development carried out by humans in the name of progress seems beneficial as it embodies the idea of modernity but it is multifaceted. All the developmental projects being set up by multi-national companies at various sites like water-bodies, mountain-regions and deserts directly affects the topography and geology of those particular regions. It is followed by initial monetary benefits to a certain few, but thereafter, it affects the human civilisations which reside not far away from these sites. Such is the truth behind human led developmental projects which gradually wipe out not only flora and fauna of those regions but the human communities as well. A notable research article titled "Ecocritical study on relationships between humans, nature, and god in the novel *the Alchemist*" highlights how mankind is solely responsible for endangering the environment as it states:

> Owing to degenerated ways of thinking or the mechanically progressive attitudes of mankind towards nature, seen as a passive receptacle, nature has begun to show severe symptoms of stress…Natural problems, in this case changes in the environment, are intentionally or unintentionally caused by human activities that do not pay attention to environmental sustainability. These problems will be more evident if various kinds of damage to the environment are caused by large-scale activities such as mining or industrial pollution. ((Nahdhiyah et al.)

This paper presents with the ill-effects of mining on man and nature through a detailed analysis of Anita Desai's novel *The Zigzag Way*, published in the year 2004. It narrates the story of Eric, an American researcher who travels to Mexico with his girlfriend Em in order to reignite his passion for writing and conducting research. He keeps travelling to investigate his family roots all through the Mexican streets and comes across barren-lands devastated by mining and he suffers consequently, while imaging the fates of miners who often suffer while working for the profits of mine owners in hope for improving their own lives, as mining is "the process of excavating into the earth to extract naturally occurring minerals usually of high value. It strengthens...the industrial development of many countries... has the potential to bring economic, social, and infrastructure development to remote and poorly developed areas" (Worlanyo and Jiangfeng). But the truth does not embody the development part only because mining is associated with as a report claims, "environmental impacts such as contamination of water bodies, air pollution, land degradation…as well as social impacts such as mass migration, displacement of people…" (Worlanyo and Jiangfeng 2). In the novel, Eric laments on realising that the Cornish community has met with same fate through the lived memories of miners and their families in Mexico who are horrified while narrating their experiences of working in the mines. Although, the narrative revolves around various other themes but the pain felt by Eric when he sees the current condition of mining communities make the novel important from an eco-critical point of view.

It moulds his perception when he realizes that the nature lies above all other material achievements as his mother recalls Eric's trip to Mexico,

> "I suppose because he doesn't remember a thing about it. He was taken to England as an infant and brought up there. Mexico is just a fairy tale to him" (18).

So, he is new to the world of mining and his encounter with the families of miners who reside in Mexico takes the story ahead.

Eric is perplexed at the thought of not finding anything to write about for which he starts exploring Mexico to get new insights, while Em goes out to work with her project ates. During one of his excursions, he attends the lecture of a lady called 'Dona Vera' about whose appearance he says, "But now the fantastic dame on her carved throne began to speak" which tells of her elegance and grace..." (26). He investigates about her lineage of the barons who ruled the mining world in Mexico and own a huge fortune. Furthermore, she has set up a research centre exclusively for 'Huichol Indians', an indigenous tribe who hold firm and old cultural ways. The Huichol Indians represent the tribe in the novel who didn't involve in mining but despite that their natural habitat is destroyed by the mining activities, carried out by Dona Vera's family as a gentleman informs Eric that "Dona Vera

is connected-through marriage-to a prominent family whose share in the mining industry is well known but it is the first time, as far as we know, that she has spoken of it in public" (30). Her character seems ambiguous initially which makes Eric doubt her genuineness as Andre tells him, "One more mystery. Many more rumours. Some have said she was a Nazi, a collaborator who got before it was too late. Some say the opposite- that she was in resistance..." (87). Therefore, she intrigues Eric, through her mysterious character.

The mention of Huichol Indians and their cultural beliefs represent man's closeness with nature and his dependence on the latter. Although they didn't involve in harming the environment but they are forced to migrate due to the ill-activities such as mining carried out by their fellow human beings, leading them to live miserably as subjects of research. This forms an important example of social impacts of mining on humans which T. Davies presents in his research paper "A Desperate Battle is Raging across Vast Tracts of Mpumalanga between Coal Mining on One Hand and Water Preservation" that "when mining companies activities destroy these lands and, to a more considerable extent, take possessions of it, farmers have no choice for any diversification strategies for their livelihood" wherein Huichol Indians lost their natural habitat to mining. The ill-effects of mining and environmentally degrading activities of humans are passed down to their next generations with all their worsening impacts that affect both the victims as well as the miner owners.

This damage done to the natural environment by repeated human activities over a long period of time is described in terms of 'anthropocene' which is described as, "an unofficial unit of geological time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems" (National Geographic Society). In this manner, the loss of Huichol Indian's habitat symbolizes the loss of harmony and co-existence between man and nature due to increased natural exploitation by humans. On the other hand, Dona Vera maintains an image of a philanthropist who serves the interests of Huichol Indians unlike anyone else in her family ever does. She thus, represents guilt and regret which were absent in her predecessors who very callously carried out mining, which is anthropogenic in nature. Such anthropogenic activities, as per scientists lead to the "environmental change caused or influenced by people, either directly or indirectly" (USUG).

Eric travels to find out the truth behind Huichol Indians alongside the history of his family. He visits the research centre setup by Dona Vera to know more about Huichol Indians and history of mining. He tells her the reason for his visit, "You see, my grandfather came out to Mexico to work for a mining company. He was Cornish, from a mining family and, you see, the mines in Cornwall failed...so I thought I'd come here to see what I could find out. I heard your family too had a connection to the mines" but Dona Vera shuns him off: "You are mis-in-formed, senor. I may be running this centre and it may be family property, but the mines, they were before my time" (41). This showcases the guilt she lives with and therefore, has set up a research centre to redeem for the sins of her family. Although she lives in luxury, as the 'queen of Sierra' and 'the champion of the indigenous Huichols' but there is lachrymose in her temperament because of the misdeeds of her family and it is evident when Eric describes the place where Dona Vera lives, "A graveyard of history- that was what she found herself surveying when she first saw the Hacienda de la Soledad, a ruin of blackened stones, fallen beams and cavernous halls" (58).

By dwelling in such conditions away from the fame and limelight, she disowns her family and their actions by trying to connect to the affected humans and wounded natural environment.

The ecocritical study of this novel therefore becomes urgent as the "discussions on 'all possible relations between literature and physical environment' can be considered as ecocrticism" (Nahdhiyah et al.). Dona Vera's portrayal in the novel *The Zigzag Way*, hence, underpins a connection between humans and environment. It apparently indicates the importance of co-existence which humans must maintain with the nature or the destruction of both these entities becomes unavoidable. This co-existence of man and nature is important because the ers of anthropocene has already done major damage to the lives of humans and has degraded the lands which is accompanied by the era of 'capitalocene' that holds the capitalist individuals or nations responsible for setting up industries and carrying out mass destructions. She instead urges for an era of 'Chthulucene' which "for Haraway, refres to processes of reworlding" ("Anthropocene - Capitalocene - Chthulucene"). Hence, to avoid any environmental mishap, co-existence and reworlding is the need of the hour. Dona Vera's thus dwells with the Huichol Indians in the lap of barren lands because she wants a reworlding with nature by helping them thrive for as long as possible. The extinction of their tribe would mean that she failed in her proving her family wrong which didn't care about fellow humans or environment. Moreover, the cultural practices of Huichol Indians are primitive in nature, which embody spirituality and treat environment as God. So, in an attempt to repent for her family's actions, she tends to safeguard and protect their tribe as, Andre remarks, "People, countries. If we think about our sins, our guilt, it is a heavy baggage we carry" (88). In this way, a process of reworlding is initiated when Dona who represents modernity and development gives up the greed held by the capitalists and adopts the ways of the nature all while tending for the Huichol Indians.

There are various instance in the novel that encircle Dona Vera as a capitalist who pretends to help Huichol in order to get her family's reputation back as: "Do you think Dona Vera's life is that of penance? By trying to serve the Huichol? An interesting idea. She does have them stay in her house" (88). Eric however sees her differently because of her demeanor and behaviours towards the guests visiting her place to conduct research in her centre as she feels threatened by everyone who surround her except Huichol Indians as has been described in the novel as:

> This Dona Vera had tried to crawl out of the room unnoticed but found every exit blocked, crowded now with people. She pushed at them…They turned their faces to her that were bird masks, with beaks shut and eyes closed, and they pushed back…pushing her further and further into the centre of the room where a cage stood in place of her bed. She realized they were trying to put her into it…If she would not get into the cage, they would enclose her within stone walls instead…there was no escape. She was slowly suffocated to death…and she panted- let me breathe…while heaving for breath (69)

Hence, she feels threatened by the people who visit her place in order to study about the ways of Huichol Indians who are already facing extinction. She thus, tries to stay by herself as the queen of 'Sierra' being revered by the indigenous tribe living at her home for which

she maintains a healthy distance from the outside world. Eric also tries to live by the memories of the miners who lost their lives and lands but he fails to fit the image his grandfather among them as he ponders, "Surely he could not have labored as the Indians did. Nor had he possessed any share of the mines, although he must have profited…His motives and his roles were to Eric an anomaly, a disturbing one" (73). Thereafter, he understands the extent of pain these Huichol Indians would have faced due to loss of their lands, professions and culture etc. The indigenous people are connected to their lands the most and "Connection to the land includes traditional knowledge, practicing cultural skills, and ceremonies, understanding clan connection…working together to look after the land, which is important for Indigenous people's health and overall well-being" (Leyton-Flor and Sangha 2). For that reason, Dona Vera can be seen as savior of Indigenous Huichol Indians tribe in the novel.

The novel entails the daily routines of miners as well in words Eric's father Davie who narrates it to his wife Betty as, "the way the day started at the mine, for instance: how the men lined up in pairs, had their names entered in a big ledger and took the tools…Singing the Ave Maria, they entered the mine" (88). Although, it sounds like a fun activity but it has various health hazards related to it. The *National Library of Medicine* reports that "Mining operations are understood to have some of the highest concentrations of potential harmful contaminants derived through anthropogenic activities…and the highest risk to both human and environmental health" (Stewart 1154). As a result, Betty loses her life to tuberculosis which is direct consequence of mining. Thus, mining not only affects humans but environment as well. Eric's attitudes towards the environment change completely when he realizes how much the mining history owes to him; took away his mother. In a generic sense too, humans must model their approach on Dona Vera's approach of reworlding or supporting Chthulucene, which is an era that embodies co-existence of man and nature.

Conclusions:

The present paper reads Anita Desai's novel *The Zigzag Way*, ecocritically, urging the mankind to think of co-existence. It devalues the idea of Anthropocene and instead promotes reworlding; Chthulucene which stresses upon the idea of harmonious living between humans and nature wherein the humans do not harm the environment for lucrative purposes and personal benefits. It attempts to safeguard the interests of indigenous people and their cultures through the approach of co-existence so that the native tribes and the nature which they hold dearest co-exist unharmed. Dona Vera, although misunderstood as a self-centered character acts as the shield of Huichol Indians, which holds anthropogenic mining as responsible for environmental devastation. In a nutshell, the paper highlights the serious consequences mining has on humans and well as environment and urges the mankind to exits in harmony with each other in the era of Chthulucene.

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