How Strangeness Takes Possession: The Ongoing Negotiation between the Familiar and the Unfamiliar

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At the outset, I take this opportunity of congratulating Anita Desai both for the honour being conferred on her and the contribution she has made to the creative act.

An occasion like this when an honour is being conferred on a writer demands a retrospect, the need to travel the same ground the writer has travelled, to place the different frames side by side, to work through the pattern through which the writer has evolved, to look for departures, experimentations, repetitions, continuities and view their interconnections as they create a cumulative meaning. Each successive work alters the earlier placement; each new strategy sends the reader back to look for an earlier trace. The autonomy of an individual text is misplaced; the text co-relates to contemporariness, locates itself in continuity and flows out into a contingent world.

Today, as a reader, I too need to rework my own critical alignment with Anita Desai's work. For the reader, like the writer, travels and returns after several journeys in other directions. For us, as near contemporaries, the journeys have been somewhat parallel in time though different in manner and pursuit. It was when Desai was engaged in writing her sixth novel, *Clear Light of Day,* that we first met. And this novel in itself makes a very good entry point into Desai's work. It belongs to a kind of writing, I choose to call the sibling novel. To date Desai has three of these—*Voices in the City* (1965), *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). These may also be seen as the novels of the plains, a landing place after the heightened intensity of the loner novels, such as *Cry, the*

Peacock (1963), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1989). There is also a third category, the novels of travelling the past, novels of journeys that trace an earlier route. To this belong *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *The Zigzag Way* (2004). In some measure *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975) also fits in here. *In Custody* (1984) stands apart, all by itself as it is a work about the nature of art and continuity, about an artist and his devotee.

The sibling novels occur at almost regular intervals and appear to fulfill a need to put the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle together, to look at their jagged edges and to wonder how they came out of the same family, similar childhoods and experiences. The jagged pieces that are sharp and vulnerable in the loner novels come back in these to fill each other's gaps. The four siblings in each novel follow different routes, chase different dreams and work out their lives differently. *Clear Light of Day* is the most positive of them and is also more firmly anchored in the socio-historical reality. These three novels form a continuity and work out the transformations of the characters. It is as if the writer is imagining in how many different ways these lives could have been lived—leading into newer routes—the roads taken and not taken as they work out their resentments, feelings of guilt and confront their failures.

The concerns of these novels spill over into her other works; childhood fears and memories, dreams, fascination with poetry and music, need for freedom, working out escape routes and anchoring onto other human beings who even if they are peripheral and vulnerable constitute figures of solid support to a child's mind. Family structures are opened out and exposed for what they are – domineering, controlling and exploitative – yet not without a supportive mechanism. The peripheries step in to sustain the crumbling edifice. Memory is contemporaneously located even though perspectives are different. These novels are also a kind of a workshop for Desai's sharpening of her narratological approaches. Desai's novels do not work with the conventional polarities or oppositional structures, but they do work with parallel worlds as interior worlds are lived in exterior space. This is visible in several of her novels wherever there is a non-acceptability of the outer reality—whether it is Maya (*Cry, the Peacock*), Monisha (*Voices in the City*) or Nanda Kaul (*Fire on the Mountain*). The gap between the external reality and the individual's perception of it, or relationship to it emphasises the instability of the 'real' and leads to a continued ambivalence or multivalence. In fact, except for *Cry, the Peacock,* and in some measure *The Zigzag Way*, the narratives unfold themselves either through parallel voices like Raka's (*Mountain*) and Lotte's (*Baumgartner's Bombay*) or through multiple narrators who decentre

the narrative, establish a contrapuntality and allow variations of the same theme to emerge.

Anita Desai is one of the most worked on Indian writers both at home and abroad, a fact which places her work at the intersection of cultural perspectives and readings. This calls for a closer look at the authorial role in the making of the text—the images, the language, the recurrence of narrative junctures, and to free her work from the obsessive psycho-analytical analysis. Desai's work resists such easy or a single-lens categorisation. With this in mind, I wish to draw attention to those aspects of her work which have not attracted similar attention: her creative use of realism as she has gone on to employ it very differently from her predecessors of the early years of the 20th century, her modernist leanings, which again are unobtrusive yet significant and her appropriation of the unfamiliar. These three are interconnected and overlap and together they constitute her narrative approach. Measured in conventional terms there is nothing that is akin to the methodology of realism in Desai's work. The interior mindscapes dominate—but one needs to recall that they are located within detailed and minute descriptions of the external world and the setting is meticulously put together with fine brush strokes. One would think a zoologist or an horticulturist is at work as lizards, snakes, rats etc. are described and the flora and fauna of different regions come alive. The descriptions also bring in a certain degree of objectivity and perform a dual function. On the one hand a concrete, real setting is created facilitating the entry of the reader into the world of the novel and on the other it detracts from the human subject and goes on to create an almost scientific base for the emotional self-indulgence of the character.

Desai's descriptive passages – whether it is the storm scene in *Cry, the Peacock* or in *Fire on the Mountain* – are heavily sensory and even sensual, and over-laden with narrative significance. Maya recounts, 'I exulted, and raised my arms to return its impassioned embrace. If the closed windows protected me from its whiplash and scorpion-sting, it still allowed me the sensation of standing waist-deep...in the centre of a churning broil.' (188) In *Fire on the Mountain*, there is greater restraint but Raka too sits on the knoll, hugging her knees, 'watching the long-tailed rose-ringed parakeets that clung to the cones....as the wind knocked into them and tore away the cones, tossing them down the hill' and Nanda Kaul finds that the wind whips at her sari 'cracking the silk folds' (81). Verbs like whip, crackle, retreat, and drum bring the sounds alive.

The sub-narrators and sub-stories add to the realistic anchoring and counter-memories allow the reader to distinguish the hallucinated and

imagined realities from the actual happenings as they occur. Counter-views intervene with linearity. This is a method which is employed with fresh variations in novel after novel. Events are unfolded not merely through flashbacks—actually there are hardly any but through parallel narrations, counter-narrations or through back-tracking, travelling the ground travelled earlier in memory, or travelling the ground travelled by someone else as in the case of Sophie who duplicates Laila's journey or Eric who pursues the track his grandfather had taken.

The socio-historical anchoring is another aspect of realism, which is different from the purpose-driven or ideologically-committed realism. It becomes a narrative strategy for framing subjectivity. This is especially strong in *Clear Light of Day* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*. In the second of these two novels, Baumgartner's boyhood memories, the time spent in the internment camp, the years in Calcutta and now the streets of Bombay provide anchoring points to the almost surrealistic setting of his flat crowded with the presence of stray, orphaned, wounded cats, very much like his own abandoned self. Baumgartner is a victim, an exile, a fugitive all in one. The postcards received from his mother with the impersonal number J673/1 stamped on them are a recurring feature in the narrative, punctuating it and calling attention to the war-torn world as well as the absent mother (see pp. 1-2, 164, 215, 229-30). They also provide a frame both for the novel and Baumgartner's life. He is a loner – 'he would not live in a pack, he did not need the pack.' (150) The narrative, through the German hippie Kurt, travels the length and breadth of a geographical territory right from Tibet, Nepal to Goa and Lucknow.

Desai's modernism is visible not merely in her narratology, the ambivalent endings, the engagement with urbanscapes but also in her portrayal of loneliness, aloneness and solitude. Some of her subjects are lonely, some prefer to be by themselves, others withdraw from the outer world like Matteo and Nirode and still others are dropouts—and they prefer invisibility. In the course of these portrayals both the feminine and the masculine come in for redefinitions. Nanda Kaul through hindsight attempts to revise the whole notion of wifehood and motherhood, Bim sidesteps them, others try to keep their inner beings intact, still others like Amla and Aunt Lila debate womanly roles. Several male characters in Desai's novels refuse to live according to the conventional idea of masculinity—Nirode, Arjun, Baumgartner and even Paul, Eric's father in *The Zigzag Way*.

The Zigzag Way builds up history and narrative structure through the use of epigraphs. In many ways, even as it uses Desai's favourite trope of travel both metaphorically and physically, the novel is very different

from her earlier novels. It is different in subject matter, choice of location and in its treatment. Somehow loneliness and failure don't warp the soul. It is a two-directional journey—Eric moves backwards to trace his grandfather's life, to find his grandmother's grave, to connect with his ancestors, to live through the past in order to discover who he is. It moves forward towards self-realisation and independence from the dominating female figures in his life—his mother and his two girl-friends. It is also a journey of another kind both for Desai and for Eric; it is a move towards appropriating strangeness: the immigrant's journey to connect with the immediate environs. Eric, in his journey to the mines, stays at an inn where Andre and his wife Paola act as commentators on Dona Vera and the many chapters in her life – European, Mexican, Huichol – and the idea is that in order to begin anew, one has to leave the past behind. 'On one level or another, it is what we do.' (102) Paola further explains how they came to be there—'because there was so much space, and it was free' (104). As one travels, one settles down, one learns to belong—by learning languages, getting involved with histories, working through geographical terrains and celebrating rituals in short, creating new landscapes of the mind. Ironically enough, the celebration of rituals connects with the past. Eric joins the Mexicans as they celebrate the ritual homage to their dead so they could 'experience the time of their ancestor and understand where they came from and who they were' (155); he follows them in search of his grandmother's grave with a bunch of flowers in his hands. And then he sees what can be described as a vision. A young woman descends the hills and asks him whether he is Paul – 'No', Eric replies – 'I am not. Paul is my father, I'm Eric, his son'. She talks about Cornwall, about the graves of the outsiders, asks about Davey (her husband) and then disappears. Eric is unable to follow her but the light is brighter, the day dawns calling the living back to their world (176-179). A little bit of mystery, a haunting atmosphere, a validation for the continuity of life—even as directions change and new spaces are inhabited. In fact, Desai has analysed the role of mothers, worked through the perception of children in almost all her work, *The Zigzag Way* happens to be the first novel in which childbirth actually takes place in a foreign land during a period of flight, and new life emerges.

Joseph Conrad once wrote: 'A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line.' And the images that are created should be clearly visible, as they rise before us even when we close our eyes. (Preface to *The Nigger of Narcissus*). Desai's contribution lies primarily in filling up the gap between feeling and communication, between thought and language, in employing language

to cover extra-linguistic dimensions, depending on other arts like painting, to create images, and evolving strategies to confront the conflictual life of the mind. The human mind is what she turns round and round with all its baggage of guilt, nostalgia, dreams and hallucination to expose every angle, every crevice and simultaneously unfold its mystery as well as let it persist. Her fiction, anchored in social constructs, sets out to create a different spatio-temporal reality and then sets it free from a narrow anchoring in any specific time or culture. Strangeness takes possession, to be appropriated and owned, to be related to and communicated across cultures and literary traditions.

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