

Intersecting Memory and Witnessing Violence in Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*

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Abstract

This essay engages with the juxtaposition of two disparate violent past events: the Holocaust, and the Mexican Revolution, which led to the forced displacement of the diasporic characters in Anita Desai's novel *The Zigzag Way*. It explores various ways in which the violent past resurfaces in the present and enables different migrant characters of the novel to bear witness to it by using tropes such as ruin, dreams and spectres. The essay also demonstrates subtle and complex intersections among different memory theories to articulate victimisation and enforced silence of the displaced and traumatized characters. It also investigates the role of fiction in depicting the 'unspeakable' horrors of the tumultuous past and the novel's readers as well as the characters' implication in it as secondary witnesses.

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Hannah Arendt's assertion in *On Violence* that the twentieth century was 'a century of wars and revolutions, hence a century of violence which is currently believed to be their common denominator,'¹ seems relevant when one counts those innumerable people who were displaced and murdered as a consequence of the Shoah and other violent events across the globe. The memories of these events continue to haunt displaced people as living spectres from the past. This essay explores various ways in which the violent past reappears in the present leading to a sense of loss, trauma and dislocation of the diasporic characters in Anita Desai's novel *The Zigzag Way* (2004). It also posits that the novel captures memory's (dis)location outside the human body and in the landscape, and the potential narration and the failure to narrate the memory by analysing tropes of ruin, dreams and ghosts, and hybrid narrative techniques. The essay demonstrates that different strands in memory studies intersect in the novel to trace vastly disparate experiences of trauma across racial, cultural and temporal divides (Huichol Indians, the Cornish miners, dissenting Nazis). Pierre Nora's 'lieux de mémoire' (which are 'At once natural and artificial, simple and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are lieux – places, sites, causes

¹ Hannah Arendt, 'A Special Supplement: Reflections on Violence', *The New York Times Review of Books* 27 February 1969.

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– in three senses – material, symbolic and functional²) link memory to a fixed and a specific local space and culture. Michael Rothberg asserts that this concept is limiting and has a ‘site-specific’ perspective which leads to polarisation of history and memory and so as an alternative, he proposes a new concept of ‘knots of memory’, which suggests that the ‘acts of memory are rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed attempts at territorialization (whether at the local or national level).’³ This concept which supports the idea of memory’s rhizomatic connections across boundaries and cultures is ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing,’⁴ in an increasingly globalised, networked, and mediated world. The essay advocates the advantages of studying *The Zigzag Way* in light of these two complementary theoretical approaches. Besides, Derrida asserts that the traumatic memory might haunt the subject in the form of what he calls a living ‘specter’. This ghost of memory keeps returning uninvited to traumatise the subject and to shape his or her personal and collective memory. In this novel, the lives of three principal migrant characters, Eric, Betty and Dona Vera, are structured by the intersections of the above-mentioned concepts.

Witnessing constitutes an integral part of memory studies because, with the passage of time when the bearer of primary memory is dead or lost, the memory gets recognition through ‘secondary witnessing.’ Dominick LaCapra defines the secondary witness⁵ as an analyst, an observer or a historian who critically works on primary memory. Unlike primary witness, this witness has not directly seen or has not been ‘there’ but is still being shaped by the original event through the vicarious experience of it. Hence, both primary and secondary witnessing are important in the context of memory studies. While primary memory is created through direct and unmediated witnessing of the original event, as in the case of Betty, Eric and reader of the novel function as secondary witnesses when they listen to the traumatic story of the ‘spectre’. In a different way, Dona Vera also becomes a secondary witness by witnessing ‘lieux de mémoire’ which eventually connects with her past through ‘knots of memory’.

Helen Tiffin says ‘postcolonial writers recast history as a “redefinable” present rather than an irrevocably interpreted past.’⁶ *The Zigzag Way* recasts the untold history with the purpose of finding its relevance for the present, to register it and to subvert the hegemony of the official testimony. In the novel, forgotten or lost narratives from the margins are retrieved and are given voice through the fictional depiction of personal or family history of the main characters.

² Pierre Nora, *The Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 14.

³ Michael Rothberg, ‘Introduction: Between Memory and Memory. From Lieux de mémoire to Noeuds de mémoire’, *Yale French Studies*, 118/119 (2010) 7.

⁴ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009) 3.

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⁶ Helen Tiffin, ‘Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of PostColonial History’. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Vol. 30, n.2 (1993) 176.

Moreover, the novel has a fragmented structure. It is divided into four parts, titled: 'Eric arrives'; 'Vera stays'; 'Betty Departs' and 'La Noche de Los Muertos'. The first part describes Eric's travel to Mexico and his 'private quest' to trace his family's history to a Mexican town where Cornish miners toiled to the death a century ago.⁷ The second section concentrates on an Austrian dancer, Dona Vera, who comes to Mexico during the Second World War by marrying into a Mexican mining family, and who subsequently reinvents herself as an expert on the Huichol Indians. The narrative shifts back to the past in the third section through frame narrative to describe Betty's diasporic life in Mexico as a wife of a Cornish miner during the year 1910. The final section traces the cross-cultural histories of mining and the Shoah in a zigzag fashion and links them to the present. Hence, the novel *The Zigzag Way* explores European and Mexican traumatic history to study its effect on migration, dislocation and settlement. Therefore, an interrelationship between memory, migration and history is reinforced through the structure of the novel. Moreover, the timeline of *The Zigzag Way* stretches over a century, including the Mexican Revolution in 1910s and the Shoah in the 1930s.

For David Lodge, a polyphonic novel is a 'novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice.'⁸ The polyphonic fiction allows the characters to have the freedom to incorporate different ideologies and styles which are not subordinated to the authorial voice. Similarly, in this novel, the polyphonic intertwined voices not only create narrative tension that dispel the hegemony of a single voice, but also claim validity for the 'other' voices or the narrative perspective of foreign characters such as Betty and Dona Vera. Besides, the novel has a non-linear structure as it proceeds backwards in time, to narrate Dona Vera's escape from Nazi Austria and to Eric's grandmother Betty's diasporic life during the Mexican revolution. The implicit reference to the Shoah in Dona Vera's dubious background is intertwined with the explicit mining history in Mexico: the novel's title alludes to the history of indigenous people who ascended from the mining pits in a zigzag fashion.

The focus of this essay is also on how re-visiting the past enables bearing witness to trauma for different migrant characters as well as the readers of the novel. The first part of the paper explores Eric's journey to Sierra Madre and how the trope of ruin establishes the relationship between 'lieux de mémoire' and Eric's secondary witnessing. The next part engages with the possibility of narrating trauma through the trope of dreams and how the concept of 'knots of memory' explores the complexities of Dona Vera's exile. The final section of the essay analyses how memory manifests as a living and speaking Betty's ghost to implicate Eric as well as the novel's reader in her story as a secondary witness.

⁷ Anita Desai, *The Zigzag Way* (Vintage: London, 2005) 55. Further references to this novel will be included as page numbers in parentheses in the text.

⁸ David Lodge, 'Conrad's "Victory" and "The Tempest: An Amplification"', *Modern Language Review* 59.2 (1990) 86.

Ruin and Secondary Witnessing

The juxtaposition of the colonial enterprise of mining in Mexico and the Shoah in this fiction provides insight into how Anita Desai depicts the gaps or voids left around these important events (lack of articulation, knowledge and direct experience) and how her fiction attempts to fill them. It is impossible to access the past completely, and therefore the author attempts to explore it through an affective semiotics of the gaze on the ruin where the past events have unfolded.

The protagonist Eric is temporally and spatially removed from the Mexican Revolution led by revolutionary Pancho Villa (1910-1920) that resulted in the dislocation death and trauma of his grandparents. He has no direct memories to connect him to this past event and yet he tries to access this part of his family past by returning to the 'lieux de mémoire', the lost fabled 'ghost town' (84) in Sierra Madre, where his diasporic grandparents lived a century ago as Cornish miners. Here, Eric indulges in a kind of archival practice by retracing these tunnels of the past by descending a dark stairwell 'as if it were a mine that no light pierced and where no air circulated' (ZW 68) so as to enter the unknown past.

The night of Los Muertos in *The Zigzag Way*, when the living remember their deceased loved ones, becomes a setting to depict the fantastic. In this space, Eric discovers complex layers of historical and present times, criss-crossed with different stories of diasporans and travellers. The seemingly normal and ordinary landscape of this ancient city seems to undercut any specific reference to what might have happened there in the past. Yet the presence of the ruin suggests that the space is mutable and it can also become the holder of the past in the present as 'lieux de mémoire'. The third-person omniscient narrator and linear descriptive narration in this section assert that the past exists everywhere in Sierra Madre: 'The past was alive here – crepuscular and underground, but also palpable' (112). The reference here is to the hidden past that is 'underground' and 'crepuscular.' Eric's tries to enter into this intangible graveyard of Mexican history full of gloomy secrets. The ruined mines and the deserted 'houses of adobe and tile that were clearly abandoned and in ruins, doors hanging from their hinges, barred windows opening on to scenes ...' (160-1) seem to be weighed down by the burden of the particular moment of the unbearable past when silver mines were deserted due to violence and bloodshed during the revolution. Although this decaying ruin is under constant assault by the atrocity of time, nevertheless it reconfigures into a 'mixed, hybrid, mutant' place bound 'intimately with life and death ... the collective and the individual.'⁹ This site of memory, 'block[s] the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, and to materialize the immaterial,'¹⁰ forging a narrative of agency that didn't exist previously at the time of the original event. In the wake of the totalitarian regime, the memory of the violent past of those who were

⁹ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*'. Trans. Marc Roudebush. *Representations*. Vol. 26.1 (1989) 19.

¹⁰ Nora 19.

silenced and marginalised within history and social memory becomes dislocated into this remnant.

James Young states that the sites of memory do not remember by themselves – they require the active agency of individuals in the production of memory.¹¹ Eric's reflexive gaze at this evocative site establishes an intimate connection between the past and the present, individual experience and the place and the act of violence. As Eric moves through the ruin, this unknown and mysterious place changes into the possible site of transmission of the individual diasporic story of the forced dislocation of his grandparents. In a strange way, this viewer becomes a 'secondary witness' who was not present during the original event of the Mexican Revolution and so has little information about it, but becomes important for being an after-witness through subsequent viewing. According to Michal Rothberg, 'Such agency entails recognizing and revealing the production of memory as an ongoing process involving inscription and reinscription, coding and recoding.'¹² It is through Eric's act of reflexive gazing at his family's past that he participates in the re-inscription of memory, loss and absence on this place. Eric's psychological and sensory engagement with this site leads to his embodied cognition and the continuity of the past in the present. This physical site of memory, hence, enables the encounter between the present and the past, the self and the other, personal experience and unknown space to render possible Eric's secondary witnessing.

Many other vivid descriptions of 'lieux de mémoire' are also incorporated in the novel to convey a looming sense of traumatic history. Critic Maya Jaggi suggests how Desai's landscapes in this novel are impregnated with complex layers of history:

Desai's acute sense of history infuses sensuous landscapes, from a Maine coast redolent of diesel oil, brine and seaweed, to the 'stained and peeling stucco' of wartime Vienna. In a Mexico built on genocidal attrition, cacti emerge from the volcanic rubble 'like stakes rising from secret graves', and cobbles are the 'shape and size of human skulls'.¹³

The above lines suggest that the characters might be ephemeral but the 'stained' landscapes from across Europe and Mexico were able to preserve the traumatic memory. In a way, the death might annihilate the character's embodied sense of pain and loss, but his memory gets dislocated outside in the landscape. As a result, an interrelationship between memory and place is established.

Dreams and Traumatic memory

Linking memory with trauma, Geoffrey Hartman states:

¹¹ James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993).

¹² Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 8.

¹³ Maya Jaggi, 'Review of *The Zigzag Way*', *Guardian*. 22 October 2004.

The knowledge of trauma is composed of two contradictory elements. One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced ... The other is a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche.¹⁴

Trauma involves disjunction, a sense of belatedness, and a compulsive return of the memories of the original event, thus fostering Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma as 'the confrontation with an event that, in its un-expectedness or horror,' and that the event 'continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time.'¹⁵ Such a conception of trauma as a lingering presence of the horrendous memory exposes the living to the sudden violent intrusion by something unexpected. The novel also explores the complexity of trauma whilst unfolding Dona Vera's story.

Dona Vera is a mysterious character, a 'coiled serpent' (46) who 'had evidently sloughed off the past and emerged like some sly and secretive snake in its new skin, to continue on her way' (96). The use of alliteration 'serpent,' 'slough,' 'sly,' 'secretive' and the simile drawn between snake and Dona Vera creates suspense around her identity and past. Just as the snake sheds its skin to allow for further growth and to remove parasites, so does Dona Vera want to get rid of her past that is hampering her growth. The narrative shifts back and forth between using a sad, strange, dreadful, pessimistic tone and a somewhat happier and hopeful one as Vera's desire to leave her past behind ignites even more. Here, the reader needs to generate their own interpretative trajectories through imposed gaps around Dona Vera's past and her vague links to the Nazis. As the story unfolds, the reader uses the hints in the novel to piece together that she came to Mexico from Austria to escape Nazi politics that threatened to engulf her (58) during the early 1930s. The sense of her suffering and guilt due to her dubious European past augmented by her 'aloofness and solitude' (62) in her diasporic present, manifests itself in the narrative of belatedness through repetitive nightmares:

If she would not get into the cage, they would enclose her within stone walls instead, because the truth was this was no magical mountaintop refuge: she had tricked herself into it and was a prisoner here, there was no escape. She was being slowly suffocated to death - screaming, struggling, and suffocating. Her hands tore at the stones, and she panted – let me breathe, let me breathe, let me breathe – while heaving for breath. (71-2)

The surreal image of being entombed and the Nazi military overtones in this passage symbolise the brutal murders in the gas chambers. The alliterated lexemes 'suffocating,' 'screaming,' 'struggling,' 'tearing the stones' symbolise the suffering and trauma that Dona Vera has escaped physically, but by which she is now entrapped psychologically. Here, Dona Vera's trauma stifles her possible 'false victim' status. Besides, the maddening atmosphere of the nightmare depicts her inner turmoil and her inability to provide a rounded account of her trauma even after

¹⁴ Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies', *New Literary History*, 26.3 (1995) 537.

¹⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 153.

decades have elapsed. The trope of nightmare is repository of violence, and it animates the horrendous past with an affective power that echoes the imaginative reconstruction of victims' perspectives in the gas chambers in Holocaust narratives such as *The Hell of Treblinka* and *Schindler's Ark*. The latter imaginatively reconstructs the inner turmoil of those in the gas chamber, and fictionalises the character's final experience of choking through the use of realist narrative techniques. Similarly, *The Zigzag Way* employs the image of the 'gas chamber' which is synecdoche of the Shoah to illustrate the emotions of a choking victim rather than the final shock. However, both *The Hell of Treblinka* and *Schindler's Ark* set a moral and ethical limit to depict it in that they never move beyond what can be described by a survivor or a primary witness's testimony. While they epitomise the shocking and violent nature of the Shoah by employing realism, Desai uses surrealist imagery - which is dense, dramatic, elliptic and absurd - to convey the extraordinary setting of the gas chamber, the tension before the shock and the powerful affects that are brought into play to convey the tragic intensity of emotional upheaval of an assumed victim. This conforms to what Jean François Lyotard contends about Walter Benjamin's books *One Way Street* and *Berlin Childhood around 1900*: that these do not 'describe' traumatic events but describe 'what is uncapturable about them.'¹⁶ Similarly, the novel *The Zigzag Way* does not actually 'describe' the Holocaust; rather it attempts to capture the unspeakable trauma of Dona Vera owing to her guilt and empathy.

Dona Vera's life goes on in the shadowy realm disfigured by the past as she is exposed to the menace of the horrendous past. As a coping mechanism, Dona Vera painstakingly tries to suppress the echoes from the past. In a monologue, she says: 'You are not to follow, hear? Go back! Now! At once!' (81). The past, here, is personified, exposing her fears as she desires to 'crush' the 'tracks' leading to it (80). She insists on forgetting and hiding rather than finding ways for her past to 'fuse with the present' (64). Her invisible private self counteracts her public position as a representative voice of the Huichol Indians - a position she actively connives in, that is borderline fraudulent, and that aligns with her lifelong pretence about her Austrian past as much more socially respectable and politically neutral. Through the depiction of this contrariness or zigzagging in her personality, the novel also rehearses the problematic postcolonial issue of authenticity in a post-factual world where subjective, expressive narration of identity is often given far more credence and positive valuation.

Much debate in memory studies has engaged with the problematisation of the ethical representation of a multiplicity of traumatic subjectivities arising from the juxtaposition of the Holocaust with other holocausts because of the incomparability and the uniqueness of the former.¹⁷ Instead of setting up such a debate, this essay focuses on the motif of silence, darkness and echoes to portray both the Shoah and the Mexican revolution. The novel also depicts how in

¹⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 90.

¹⁷ See LaCapra (1998: ch. 2); Miller and Tougaw (2002: Introduction), for instance.

both events, totalitarian regimes were responsible for death and destruction. Both also resulted in the forced dislocation of the people across the globe.

While trying to trace the past of miners in the Mexican ruins, Dona Vera experiences a similar darkness as she has experienced in her nightmares about the Holocaust:

She felt certain their echoes must still resound ... Perhaps even the hoofs of Zapata's horses, carrying the message of the Revolution: 'Tierra y Libertad!' Taking a few steps into that darkness, she was brought to a standstill by the total absence of light ... it could only grow darker, blacker, more totally. Still, she stood waiting to see if something would materialize ... 'Tierra y Libertad!' she said to herself and then, realizing there was no one to hear, shouted out, 'Tierra y Libertad!' (59)

The chaotic echoes and total darkness symbolise the traumatic past and its persistent presence. The turbulent history of the abandoned silver ore mines resurges magnified due to the total absence of light. The echoes of revolution bring back the atrocities committed by the colonial miners and re-ignite Dona Vera's suppressed memories of the Nazism. Dona Vera's final declamation 'Tierra y Libertad!' following the incident signify not only her implication as a secondary witness in the trauma inflicted on the inhabitants by the colonial miners and their descendants, but also her conscious desire for liberation from the oppressive past and her rebellion against the hegemonic forces be it the Nazis or the colonial miners. Her encounter with this 'other' Mexican experience opens up the 'Third Space,' which according to Homi Bhabha is an in-between or interstitial space of movement, negotiation and appropriation that also has the possibility of mixing.¹⁸ This 'third space,' which eventually traces the lines across the two disparate histories, paves way for Dona Vera's 'knots of multidirectional memory.' In spite of being a dissenting Nazi, she had been forced to bear the brunt of the past and her gaze as an outsider on the Mexican genocide, projecting a similar story of loss, injustice and suffering, provides her with a new possibility for creating a bridge between disparate historical experiences.¹⁹

While the traumatic past of Dona Vera is illustrated through surrealist images or the trope of dreams, the motif of silence and disruptive narration, Desai aims not just to fill the gap left by the unarticulated Mexican past but also to create a new presence. To fill this void, Desai renders visible that part of the dreadful past which has not been acknowledged up till now, and which the trauma has never allowed to be evident. To do so, she uses the trope of the ghost. According to Derrida, the ghost is the one who 'is not only the carnal apparition of the spirit, its phenomenal body, its fallen and guilty body, it is also the impatient and nostalgic waiting for a redemption.'²⁰ The presence of the ghost in the present opens up a discursive space in which the memories of the deceased are transmitted over several generations through 'secondary witnessing' as we will

¹⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 296.

¹⁹ Michael Rothberg, 'Multidirectional memory', *Témoigner: Entre histoire et mémoire*, 176.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 170-1.

see later. In *The Zigzag Way*, the figure of Betty's ghost indulges in the defiant act of reproducing and remembering her lost story. The fictional act of seeing directly from victim's eyes and her purposeful act of direct witnessing serve the purpose of recounting the past when the ghost of Betty unlocks the hidden traumatic precepts of Eric's family.

History is juxtaposed with the personal memory which exists only in the form of Betty's ghost, or, in the words of Derrida, as the absent presence of the ghost which is explained as follows:

The specter appears to present itself during a visitation. One represents it to oneself, but it is not present, itself, in flesh and blood. This non-presence of the specter demands that one take its times and its history into consideration, the singularity of its temporality or of its historicity.²¹

Betty's ghost is a dispossessed and dislocated character whose voice has been erased and forgotten due to death and violence. However, it seeks to redeem the dead from enforced anonymity by making itself heard through her romantic and fascinating personal story. Her storytelling depicts alternative, fragmented and partial traces of the deadly conflict in Mexico. Her ghostly apparition hence becomes an agency of transmission of her traumatic ordeal when any other means of public or private testimonies are unavailable. Through Betty's storytelling process of association, substitution and incorporation, the voids in Eric's knowledge are partially filled. The presence of Betty's ghost also highlights the blurring of boundaries between the past and the present, presence and absence, fantasy and reality.

Ghosts, trauma and the reader's implication

The third section of the novel 'Betty Departs' is in flashback and revolves around the menacing repercussions of the Mexican war on the once living migrant alien Betty. Because of the inherent difficulty in expressing trauma completely by the victim herself, her story is narrated alternately by third-person omniscient and first-person narrator, adeptly depicting the effects of trauma on Betty and to give a coherent rendition of the nightmarish events during the Mexican revolution. The author adds intensity to these violent acts by first creating a utopian and romantic image of Mexico and by eventually deconstructing it. When Betty first arrives in Mexico, she is enchanted by its beautiful landscapes: 'Travelling ... Betty was made breathless by the vast space and by the snow-topped volcanoes' (117). The omniscient narrator lingers over and dramatises the vision of this beautiful 'scene' to elaborate on Betty's happiness as an immigrant in the New World. In an ironic twist, the Mexican landscape soon becomes corrupted with hunger for power. As the revolution led by Zapata and Pancho Villa makes painful inroads into social life: 'Then the mineros began to disappear from their mine, without a word' (135), and the home – the place that normally should provide security and shelter – paradoxically is also affected by the

²¹ Derrida 157.

violence outside. The threat of outside violence penetrates and shadows the private and intimate space of home to blur boundaries between private and public, interior and exterior. Betty becomes a hidden primary victim of and witness to the acts of violence as she is exposed to their complexity: 'like a new rift, open and raw, that had been suddenly revealed.' (138) The simile used here suggests how the intensely strange and frightening landscape is exposed to Betty 'like a new rift, open,' as a scene of awe and bewilderment. Desai interweaves closeness and distance through shifting narrative styles to vividly describe the atmosphere during the revolution: 'Then there was a night ... echoed with a sudden volley of shots, shocking and splintering ... At dawn the news came that the rebels, the insurgents, had looted the warehouse, emptied the vaults' (136). The use of alliteration – 'shots, shocking and splintering' – evokes the impending scene of violence, destruction and dread in which Betty becomes trapped. The shift to fast-paced narrative realism, using short sentences and foregrounding active verbs, demonstrates the radical transformation of once a beautiful landscape into a cursed place, with flares lighting in the night and the corpses lying everywhere. It eventually disfigures her diasporic home into an uninhabitable space as Betty becomes a passive witness to the surging violent spectacle from the silent corners of her home. Her death while escaping this violence becomes symbolic for all the victims of the Mexican Revolution who are left unheard and forgotten.

Derrida argues that the possibility for a just future lies in one's ability to remember the victims of injustice – to conjure the dead and listen to what they have to say rather than to forget them. According to him, the living have a responsibility to attend to those who are 'no longer' living or those who were denied awareness in the past.²² Similarly, both Eric and the novel's reader become implicated in Betty's trauma. For every testimony, there has to be a listener: as Laub and Felman say, 'testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude.'²³ The reader enables Betty's narrative to become testimonial. Thus, the testimonial act is witnessed by the 'other' who then participates in the testimony and also 'comes to partially experience trauma in himself'.²⁴ Therefore Betty's testimony, possible because of the reader, serves the function of 'reconstructing a history and essentially re-externalizing the event'²⁵ and filling a 'gaping, vertiginous black hole'²⁶ in the reader. The testimonial process, hence, renders visible the trauma of the victim–Betty. Desai's writing suggests what Russian Formalist Valentin Voloshinov says: 'Any utterance, no matter how weight and complete in and itself, is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication. But that continuous verbal communication is, in turn, itself only a moment in the continuous, all-inclusive, generative

²² Derrida xix.

²³ Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* edited by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992) 70.

²⁴ Laub and Felman, *Testimony*, 57.

²⁵ Laub and Felman, *Testimony*, 69.

²⁶ Fresco cited in Laub and Felman, *Testimony*, 64.

process of a given social collective.²⁷ Therefore, Betty's *utterance* entails acts of seeing and viewing by the novel's reader. With the presence of the potential and implied audience, Betty's utterance, even if partially and not in its totality, now participates in reinstating those events in the present that were earlier compromised due to Eric's fragmented and disruptive memories. Moreover, the dialogical narrative between Eric and Betty in the penultimate scene imposes an attentive proximity between the two and also makes Eric a secondary witness to Betty's trauma in the novel.

The open-ended climax of the novel when the ghost of Betty suddenly disappears at the dawn after briefly interacting with Eric is described as follows:

There was only the melancholy tinkling of bells and a movement of the speckled stones that proved to be young goats who had come to graze ... The light grew brighter, the sun appeared and everyone went streaming back to where they had come from. (179)

The lexeme 'only' suggests the melancholy tinkling of bells is caused by the goats and not by memories of the past. The ambivalent concluding line 'Everyone went streaming back' denotes that daily life continues as normal and that Eric's journey is left unfinished. The novel doesn't end in the end but loops, recoils and retrenches in the past to be hesitatingly prospective.

Suhasini Vincent asserts that this change in the end is marked by the shift in narrative technique from the fantastic to the realistic by evoking Eric's sustained hesitation in the climax. She says:

Even though the fictional space abounds with traces of magical realism, I would also like to highlight the fact that certain characteristics in the novel definitely do not fall in the category of the magical realist mode as it abounds in fantastic elements ... a vast difference exists between the brief hesitations experienced when reading a work of magical realism, and reading a work of fantastic literature, when sustained hesitation occurs.²⁸

This sustained hesitation, a characteristic of the fantastic,²⁹ also affects the dynamic relation between Eric, the ghost and its story by preserving the difference and the distance between the secondary witness and the original trauma. The partial effect of ghostly presence and the logical advancement of the storyline signify that Eric doesn't fully internalise the dangerous past. It just stops short of complete contact. It also suggests geographical and temporal distance between the past events of traumatic repercussion and the present.

²⁷ V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973) 95.

²⁸ Suhasini Vincent, 'A Descent down the Ladder of Time in Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 31.1 (2008) 149.

²⁹ Tzvetan Todorov. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard. (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973).

One can say that the novel successfully juxtaposes vastly disparate experiences of traumatic pasts across racial, cultural and temporal divides by employing a syncretic approach of memory studies. This fiction *The Zigzag Way* portrays an unspeakable as well as indescribable traumatic past as a 'lieux de mémoire' and as the living ghost that affects the present of the characters in the novel and fashions their personal and collective memory. The act of writing becomes a site of bearing witness to trauma where the reader gains importance as a secondary witness in the process of restitution of forgotten and marginalized stories which have been lost through violence and atrocity, as well as the distances of space and time.

Bhawana Jain has completed her PhD in English Literature from Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis. Her research focuses on migration and trauma literature. She has a particular interest in issues pertaining to diaspora, memory studies and cross-cultural encounters. Her articles have been published in several books and Journals. She has previously taught at the University of Delhi. She is currently working at Université Paris-1, Panthéon-Sorbonne.

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