



## Spiritual Quest Culminates into a Transcendental Experience in Anita Desai's Novel *Journey to Ithaca*

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### Abstract

*Journey to Ithaca* is a beautiful and evocative novel of Anita Desai. It highlights the theme of spiritual quest and that leads to transcendental experience. Desai explores the journey of almost all the major characters towards spiritual reality. Unlike the other novels of Anita Desai, *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) makes a tremendous beginning in Indo-English fiction. It carries the idea of internationalism. The protagonists belong to diverse cultures, such as Italy, Germany, Egypt and India. Moreover, the journey which ends in tragedy in *Baumgartner's Bombay* comes to its completion in *Journey to Ithaca*. In the novel, India appears as a kind of Ithaca. From symbolic point of view, *Journey to Ithaca* is a novel about the soul's journey to enlightenment and awakening. It is a journey where Ithaca ceases to be a specific place. The theme of the novel deals with one's journey within oneself, a journey which ends in India only; because India is the only country which identifies the significance of the journey within. This paper examines how the spiritual quest culminates into a transcendental experience in the novel *Journey to Ithaca*.

**Keywords:** Spiritual Quest, Journey, Vedanta Philosophy, Existence, Mother, Ithaca, Humanism.

People embark on journeys with different motives like for work, for entertainment, or for pleasure. There are also people who travel for enlightenment and illumination, they are spiritual travellers. "Matteo and Laila who move towards spiritual depths to explore the meaning and nature of reality and also of illusion. It is a saga about the

soul's journey towards enlightenment and awakening (Rani, B. Sandhya)." "Spiritual experiences of Desai are related to a process of transformation of mind to attain extreme peace and harmony in life, in accordance with religious ideals, it is the journey of joy and experience of deep eternity in the path of divine love (Pandey & Shrivastav)".

Like the trends in Greek drama, Anita Desai has introduced a new technique of prologue and epilogue in *Journey to Ithaca*. Besides prologue and epilogue, the whole story runs through four chapters. In this novel, Desai presents the adventures of three protagonists: Matteo, Sophie and the mysterious mother. In the prologue, the novelist vividly narrates Matteo's early childhood, his formative influences and his natural inclination towards the spiritual quest of life. Matteo as an Italian boy was sent to school escorted by his uncle with the latter's sons. But to Matteo, the school was like "theorem set within a larger theorem" (JI, 17). So, this mathematical precision created in him a failure as a student at his early age. In fact, he is deeply influenced by his English tutor Fabian who arouses in him inquisitiveness for spiritual pursuits. Fabian presents him a famous spiritual book of Hermann Hess's *The Journey to the East* which becomes a life-long pattern of Matteo. Fabian also enkindles in him a curiosity towards the Vedanta Philosophy. After reading the *Journey to the East* he becomes more inclined towards spiritualism and Vedantic Philosophy. Another important incident is Matteo's marriage with Sophie who was said to be a German journalist. This marriage was ceremonised in 1975 at the consent of their parents. After this marriage, both Sophie and Matteo left for India. There is a gap between Matteo and his wife, because of their temperamental incompatibility and antithetical attitude towards life. Even their children don't share their views.

In *chapter one* of the novel, Desai records Sophie's and Matteo's departure from Italy to India, their wanderings from one ashram to another ashram and their contradiction for the East-West encounter. She finely depicts their experiences in Kumbha Mela at Allahabad, their arrival in an ashram in Bihar and again their disinclination towards the activities of the ashram. But the husband and the wife follow divergent ways. Apparently they represent the two poles of life: Sophie leads the Western life of

senses, but Matteo has resigned the life of senses and pleasures. Through their repulsion as the ashramites, they are led to a movement and vision in their lives. Sophie and Matteo came to India for satiation of their spiritual thirst. Both Sophie and Matteo have "a design pattern to their wanderings" (JI, 35). In their quest for truth, Matteo and Sophie arrive at Bombay. They meet Mr. Pandey in an ashram in Bombay who recites the philosophical Shlokas of the *Bhagawad Gita* for them. Sophie does not reconcile to her husband for the purpose of this journey. She is in search of her existence as a woman wishes from her husband. Occasionally, Matteo loves her with contempt. As a matter of fact, the novelist displays her domestic vision through Sophie and Matteo. This vision represents real relationship between husband and wife. Sophie sometimes complains against Matteo's coldness towards her. Desai delicately depicts:

Sometimes, if she felt strong enough, she struck at him and fought with him, but this made him more violent. Then he would leave her to go and sit against the wall, his face twisted with repulsion ... and flung out of the room to go and sleep on the veranda (JI, 52).

This is a portrait of their relationship as husband and wife. Then, they go to Allahabad for the Kumbha Mela. When Matteo feels ill there, he is told by a saint that he is in need of a guru but not a doctor. They come to another ashram in Bihar and they stay here in a room. Matteo is surprised to see a sadhu with a gold plaited lighter and a packet of cigarettes in his pocket. Sophie too finds the influence of casteism quite intolerable. Like other heroines of Anita Desai, she rebels against the management of the ashram. She feels totally suffocated and always complains against the unpalatable atmosphere of the ashram. *Chapter two* focuses on yet another challenge to Matteo. Matteo feels uncomfortable when he comes to know about Sophie's pregnancy. However, on the advice of Richard, both Sophie and Matteo come to a

mountain in the Himalayan region where an ashram is run by a pretty young woman. She is known as 'Mother' who follows the religion of humanity. The posters of the ashram are marked with love as truth and work as joy (but not pleasure). The novelist thinks that God might be realized through love, not through a ritualistic religion.

The Mother comes from a Muslim family but her Master Swami Premananda was a Hindu. This ashram gives credit to those who really seek God. Matteo is intoxicated with his quest for truth. Moreover, despite the protest of Sophie, Matteo becomes a true disciple of the Mother. Because she seeks some indefinable features in him. But Sophie suspects the spiritual authority of the Mother. She, with her womanly sentiments becomes jealous of the Mother because of her too much involvement with her husband. She cannot understand the nature of sacred love as explained by Matteo. Sophie tries her best to take Matteo away breaking the spell of the Mother. But she fails in her effort to deviate her husband from his path. Sophie, thus, feels herself isolated and bored. In her loneliness, she is fond of listening to pop music. She always exhibits the excess of rationalism in her human relationship. Sophie's rational mind and her logical outlook of life demanded scientific answers, from the Mother.

In the meanwhile, Sophie gives birth to Giacomina and Isabel at an interval of some years. Then she becomes rebellious against the forced decision of her husband to live in an ashram. Like Maya and Sita, she feels alienated. Being afraid of the future of her two children, she dislikes making them barbarians in India. So, with the anxieties of a mother, Sophie leaves the company of her husband and comes back to Italy to her parents. She feels rather helpless and hopeless, because her parents try to inculcate in her the virtues and rituals of Roman Catholicism. However, she still feels the absence of Matteo. But soon in a fit of womanly weakness, she tries to fill this absence in the company of another gentleman, Paolo, whom

she meets in a party with Matteo's sister, Caroline, in Italy. Paolo also finds this matured woman quite fascinating. But she eventually decides to leave Paolo and immediately returns to India for nursing her ailing husband.

*Chapter three* begins with the poem of Federico Garcia Lorca. The arrival of Sophie in India reveals another important thread of the story. Sophie wants to discover the real person behind the legend. She decides to continue her own journey to Ithaca, to search out the truth of the Mother's past and to unravel her mystery. She discovers about the Mother with Montu-da, a devoted doctor in the ashram. The doctor narrates the entire past life of Laila, now designated as a Mother in the group of Krishnaji, and as a seeker of a spiritual Guru in Swami Prema Krishnaji. A daughter of Alma and Hameed, Laila rebels against the traditional code of Muslim religion. *Chapter four* describes the end of Sophie's search and arrival in Bombay, at Krishnaji's house, in order to know the past life of Laila. Sophie recognizes Krishna, because she had seen him in Paris and Venice. To Sophie's query about Laila, Krishnaji says that it was he who acted as a 'guardian', 'a father', 'a teacher' who took her to different parts of the world for performing dance. Finally, Laila seeks her master, her spiritual Guru, on the mountains of the Himalayas. Before his 'Nirvana', the master assigned to her all the responsibilities of the ashram.

Sophie finds Laila's diary in which her journey to Ithaca is recorded. Sophie's actual journey to Ithaca begins from India, and after her second visit ends in India. Sophie detects in her a superhuman will for pursuing the higher vision of God. Thus, she discovers the truth about the mysterious Mother and ultimately she goes back to the Mother's ashram. The epilogue of the novel brings a turning point to the story. Sophie is satisfied in her inquisitiveness for the past of the Mother. All she does is to have possession over her husband. She finds Matteo absent in the ashram as he has already departed.

Sophie perceives the higher position of Matteo as a seeker under the guidance of the Mother.

It is remarkable that Sophie decides to undertake a journey like Matteo, for mystic experience. The theme of spiritual quest culminates into a transcendental experience in Desai's novel. O.P. Budholia has aptly remarked: "In this novel, Anita Desai achieves a grand success in presenting higher values of love, humanism, realism, mysticism and a unified vision of universal brotherhood" (*Anita Desai: Vision and Technique in Her Novels*, 187).

*Journey to Ithaca* is a compassionate delineation of a European couple pursuing opposite course of life at the beginning but finally seeks a spiritual home. Moreover, the novel deals with the spiritual quest of the couple, Matteo and Sophie, which propels them to make a journey to India. In the novel, India appears as a kind of Ithaca, the new spiritual centre that exists in the form of a dream fulfillment for the European couple. The novelist delicately portrays Matteo's alienation and the concomitant quest for spirituality. Sophie, a German journalist follows her husband to India and wanders with him from one ashram to another. It is significant that she has ashrams a Western oriented approach towards life and does not have a blind faith in ashrams and gurus. With a rational mind and logical outlook, Sophie joins her husband Matteo's quest for truth.

Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* focuses on her personal experiences through the Mother with whom she came in contact in Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India. To her spiritualism is relevance to 'divine power' 'spirit', and 'wisdom'. It is different from 'physical' or the 'concrete world' and is beyond any religion. In other words, spiritual experiences of Desai are related to a process of transformation of mind to attain extreme peace and harmony in life, in accordance with religious ideals, it is the journey of joy and experience of deep eternity in the path of divine love.

Anita Desai is a postcolonial Indian English novelist who with her spiritual experience exposes the vision of life. It is pertinent to note that India is the name of the natural experience of self-realization, divine love and a profound awakening of the spirit. R. K. Shrivastava succinctly remarks:

Among the Indian novelists experimenting consciously with the English language, Anita Desai has a unique place. While the efforts of Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya have been towards making English close to Indian languages, to make it more adaptable to Indian needs, Anita Desai has raised it to lyrical heights, showing as it were, that Indians are capable of writing in a language which can compare well with the best in the English-speaking countries. (42)

The title of the novel *Journey to Ithaca* has symbolic significance as it is related to India - the place where three People's journeys end - the journey of Sophie, Matteo and of the mother. This particular title of the novel is taken from title of C.P. Cavafy's poem 'Ithaca', translated by Roe Dalven.

The plot of the novel is based on Sri Aurobindo's vision about 'the Mother. *Journey to Ithaca* is not only a portrayal of the spiritual philosophy of East and materialistic philosophy of West, but also it shows the cultural conflict between East and West through a European couple Matteo and Sophie. Gauri Shakar Jha writes:

The plan behind Anita Desai's writing is to expose the interior self, its feeling, its experience and its responses; here, political and social realities relegate to the back seat; consequently, her characters become introvert, speak less and react more, and find themselves trapped. (86)

The novel ends with the death of Mother and Matteo's journey to Himalaya for spiritual quest and enlightenment. This indicates the transformation of the Mother from

Laila to Leila, a Krishana devotee and then from Leila to the Mother spiritual *Guru*. The Mother as a young woman travels around the world i.e. Paris, Venice and New York in search of peace and perfection but ultimately finds her moment of transcendence in India. Mother born in Egypt, at her young age was known as dancer Laila. Leila learns to dance in Bombay to achieve Supreme bliss. When Sophie learns about the past of the Mother from an old man called as Krishna she finds that Mother learns Indian dance from him at *Krishna School of Dance* in Bombay who states:

I trained her. She was a child; she came to me for training. I taught her Indian dance. She had never seen Indian dance before...I was like a father to her. I took her everywhere – to Paris, Venice, New York-everywhere. But her in India...Here she began running after gurus. She said dancing was not for her, she wanted to live a spiritual life. (JI, 318)

*Journey to Ithaca* encapsulates the exercise of self-realization and spiritual bliss through Indian spiritual philosophy to accomplish peace, tranquility, divine love and meditation which comes from being totally connected with self or soul, body and mind and a higher capability. This is the beautiful vision of life, loaded with the subtleties that open one up to a quality of life unmatched by the trappings of the material or linear world. Utmost happiness is the utter joy and contentment. In the words of Mother:

When I was very young, came here as a very young girl, full of ideas, full of dreams about gods, about temples and religion – I went to temple, I said all the prayers, I went around every one of the idols, left them money, placed flowers - but I was not happy, and I was not blessed. (114)

Anita Desai's use of imagery and symbol is always unique. She is well-recognized in Indian English fiction for her style and technique. In this novel, *Journey to Ithaca*, Desai

portraits Matteo symbolically with lotus. She narrates:

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... clean and pure. (157)

Dragged from guru to temple to ashram by her husband, Sophie's frustration reaches a peak when he finds inspiration in the shape of "the Mother", an ageing guru by whom he becomes obsessed. Sophie decides to go on a journey of her own: to investigate the Mother's past, believing that if she destroys the woman's enigma she can break the "spell" that Matteo is under and so save their marriage.

In *Journey to Ithaca* Desai presents a very profound Vedantic philosophy of the unfathomable knowledge of Nature. For her God is present in every particle of Nature. While the Mother attains her spiritual enlightenment at the mountain, after the Mother's death, Matteo also selects a departure in the nature (mountain) for the absolute peace and attains identify in illumination and miraculous spiritual power. This is evident in the symbolic meeting between Matteo and his son Giacomo. To Giacomo his father looks like "the painting of Jesus in Church" (309). This is nothing but Matteo's salvation here in this world. Matteo attains this „miraculous spiritual power“ after the death of his guru, the Mother. The Mother is but the "spiritual leader" who guides her disciple towards truth and God. This is also symbolic. According to Hinduism the "Guru" is the one, who shows the path of liberation (*Moksha*) to the disciple but *Moksha* is to be achieved by oneself by trial and error. Once the "Guru" puts his disciple on the proper path, his work is over. This is what exactly happens in the case of Matteo and the Mother. After the death of the Mother it is the Nature that provides

Matteo the spiritual enlightenment and he attains the *Moksha* here in this world.

“Like all works of literature based on quest and journey, *Journey to Ithaca* also lays its emphasis on the search rather than the destination. It is the journey or means that matters, not the end; for the end itself could be different from what we had expected. The attainment of self at the end of the tunnel might be a serendipitous discovery; yet all knowledge; all exposure and experience are meant for the improvement of the self (Lakshmi A. K)”.

### Conclusion

Anita Desai expresses a dazzling style of writing, superbly designed of different types of sentences. She uses appropriate and effective literary devices, stream of consciousness technique, imagery and symbols, and nicely conceived philosophy of India in her novel. These aspects of Desai add her significant value of the novel. Desai evokes spiritual India and describing it as “Ithaca” a divine destination for the suffering and wandering souls depicting a life of simplicity and high values as the prerequisite of a spiritual life. The present novel is neither physical nor psychological but spiritual in identity. Through this novel, Desai tries to justify that vision of truth. Her philosophies reminiscent us that God does not present in a temple or in a holy book. He appears in the hearts of every individual. We can self-realize ourselves through our work and truthfulness in our lives. She depicts it and explains that all the barriers of gender, religion and nationality are ignored in the path of incarnation and enlightenment. It is based on only the humanity. The complex narrative structure, with layers of flashback, quantum shifts of location, and recurrent imagery make this a book that repays re-reading. More importantly, Desai’s exploration of the universal yearning for meaning in life is carried out with an intelligence, generosity and a total lack of pretension that make her book exceptional.

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