



JOURNEY TO ITHACA: SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OF DESAI

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ABSTRACT

In all walks of life the universe is guided, directed and controlled by the Supreme Power. Desai in Journey to Ithaca tries to place a record of her personal experiences through the Mother with whom she came in contact in Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry. Spirituality is related to 'spirit', 'wisdom' and 'divine power' and is different from 'physical or seen world' rather it is abstract and greater than the 'concrete world' and is beyond any religion, going temple to temple, church, synagogue and a mosque, etc. 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.

Journey to Ithaca, published in 1995, is a fine presentation of spiritual experience of Anita Desai. Anita Desai is a distinguished persona in Indian English novels world who with her spiritual experience reveals that she is gifted with an extraordinary vision of life as she uses fiction as a medium to show the world that India is the name of the natural experience of self realization, divine love and a profound awakening of the spirit. In the words of R.K. Shrivastava

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 theme of the novel revolves around the Mother and the couple- Matteo and Sophie. The couple soon after their love marriage join the 1970s flight of young Europeans to India. Matteo is an Italian, raised in the luscious countryside around Lake Como, restless since childhood for knowing the spiritual truth and getting divine bliss. He has been introduced by a tutor to Hermann Hesse's a book named as *The Journey to the East* which inspired him to go East and a desperate longing for India. On the contrary, Sophie is German, practical and worldly - is willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. In India, together they visit swamis, gurus, ashrams - always searching. Matteo is seeking spiritual enlightenment, but for Sophie fulfillment lies in earthly love. The differences between the couple them appear noticeably when they meet the Mother a holy woman. Desai interweaves a beautiful story with threads of love marriage of young couple Matteo -an Italian husband and Sophie -a German wife revealing the desperate quest of Matteo for spiritual identity, spiritual existence, and above of all spiritual togetherness with the Mother his spiritual *Guru* which Sophie does not understand and takes the Mother as an ordinary woman and thus Sophie feels distressed in India. In absence of Matteo's love in life, Sophie experiences loneliness, estrangement, existential predicament, rootlessness, identity crisis in India. Different attitudes of couple are magnified with the entry of the 'Mother'. Desai explains about Mother in an interview with Magda Costa:

She was a French woman who set up this ashram in Pondicherry with a very famous Indian sage, Aurobindo. She outlived him by many years and died in her nineties. She was very much revered in India. What intrigued me was that, being a foreigner, she became this Indian mystic.

The title of the novel 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 novel begins with one quotation from *Immortality* by Milan Kundera: "...things exist in their essence even before they are materially realized and named". Matteo and Mother are mystical characters who come India in search of their Masters. Mother grows up in Cairo and finds her way to East by joining company of Indian Krishan *bhakt* dancers whom she has met in Europe:

Mother was a beautiful dancer who danced the role of Radha, pining for her lover Krishna. And behold, there was a blaze of light and there was Krishna. And they danced together-the divine lovers—(149)

Matteo's journey is to know the relationship between *jiva* and *jagat*. Living in Mother's Ashram, Matteo experiences self realization and divine love through the Mother's discourse. Matteo is a man with divine view of inner life and the sense of the spiritualism, who through Yoga achieves self-confidence, emotional stability bringing body, mind, and spirit in



harmony. Gradual transformation of Matteo's mind starts when he reads the book by Herman Hesse, "It all comes of reading Hesse that damned *The Journey to the East*". (98) In India, Matteo learns Sanskrit to read *Katha Upnishad*, *Vedas* to meet the supreme power.

The backgrounds of the novel are set in Italy, Egypt and India. The novel opens at a hospital in India with the Matteo- and Sophie. Sophie comes to see serious Matteo and wants to take him back to Italy but Matteo does not want to go back leaving his spiritual *Guru*, the Mother. The couple Sophie and Matteo has two children –Giacomo and Isabel who live in the loving custody of their grandparents in Italy:

The more happily the children settled into the life of their grandparent's home the more safe and secure and contented they became, the more she felt able to relax her fierce hold on them. It was as if the lioness who had guarded them so passionately earlier had now delivered them into a safe haven so that that zealous protectiveness dwindled. (174)

The plot of the novel is based on Sri Aurobindo's vision about 'the Mother' and is divided into six parts including the prologue and the epilogue, besides four other chapters. *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)

Chapter one tells us that Sophie comes to India to see sick Matteo and wants to take him back to Italy but Matteo as a devoted disciple and a strict follower of Mother does not want to go back leaving Mother in her last days of life. She says "If the Mother is ill, it seems the devotees must fall ill too. Is she some pharaoh to take you all to the tomb with her?" (3) But Matteo does not want to go back under any circumstance. Sophie, while running her fingers through Matteo's hair to soothe him, tells him: "When you are well, Matteo, we will leave", (4) but Matteo replies even in his intense weakness, " You will leave Sophie ... but not I" (5). Sophie feels unhappy, neglected and displaced after marriage. She wants to live with her husband and children. She asks, "Why can we not be together again, at home with the children?" (5). She nurses the sick Matteo and says, "All you wanted was the Mother, you told me that. You said you needed the Mother- not me, not the children". (4)

Chapter two is about Matteo and Mother's relationship and Sophie's displacement. Chapter three is about Sophie's discovery of truth about the Mother. Chapter four tells us how Laila is



transformed into Leila and then the Mother. Epilogue is the final portion of the novel. It closes with the death of Mother and Matteo's journey to Himalaya for enlightenment.

The novel shows 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 reveals:

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. (318)

Laila stands before the Master like a statue and replies to his question that she was *Lila*, his devotee. Master regards her as:

Thou art Shakti, he pronounced, Supreme Power. Thou art Durga, Mother of us all. Thou art Kali, The Divine Force, And Parvati, Sweet Goddess of the Mountain. And all at once The Heavens burst into light and music. Of joyous celebration. The stars sang their jubilee. The Moon its blessing gave. Fresh Himalayan winds blew From the Abode of Snow. The Master stepped forth and placing on my shoulders A shawl of ochre silk, Maiden, said He, Come follow me, And henceforth my home Thy Haven shall be." (340-341)

The novel proves that description of spiritual experience is not bound in religion rather it is beyond religious practices and traditions of the world; it is only about attaining divine power. Mother says, "...Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, makes one fearful... This is no church, my friends, this is no temple or mosque or Vihara. We have no religion."(110) The Mother says about religion symbolically relating it with crow:

Religion? Like the black crows up in the tree, caw –caw-caw, scolding, scolding! But do they crow at us now? No , they are silent! We have silenced them! They know we do not listen to the black scolding voices of religion here.

Journey to Ithaca encapsulates the process of self realization and spiritual bliss through Indian spiritual philosophy to attain peace, tranquility, divine love and meditation which comes from being totally connected with self or soul, body, and a higher power. It is a high experience of life, rich with the subtleties that open one up to a quality of life unmatched by



the trappings of the material or linear world. Supreme happiness is 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)

During the stay at Ashram, Matteo learns the role of ‘sadness and tiredness ’in life as the part of human existence .Mother beautifully describes:

Let yourself be tired, be sad. Allow yourself this feeling—it is not bad. The sadness will take you along a path that will lead you where you have not gone before. The tiredness will let you experience what you have not experienced in the day when you were strong and active. These feelings must be felt fully, with all your being. That is the only purpose of our existence here, to experience fully to be fully.(113)

In the Ashram, the Mother teaches the importance of hard working, dedication to love describing the way of *gyana*- the way of knowledge is nothing compared to the way of *bhakti*- the way of love. Mother teaches only love in the Ashram as how hard work is related to *Sadhana* , it is described in very artistically by Desai. She says to her disciples in the Ashram that they work all the day in the Ashram and she let them rest a little keeping engaged in cutting vegetables, watering the garden, looking after the chickens and the cows, building the new shades to teach the life of devotee, to have the experience of being a devotee. Giving example of a musician’s *Sadhana*, the mother further teaches what is *Sadhana* as how he trained himself and how he begs his guru to take him as a pupil, comes to live in guru’s house so that for twenty- four hours a day he can live in the atmosphere created by the guru. He serves his guru, even by cooking his food and sweeping his floor, everything. Then the guru agrees to give him a lesson, and he learns. Through many years of *Sadhana* carried on before he becomes capable of calling himself a musician and playing music.

The Mother tries to preach that the effort of musician or the devotion and concentration of a great musician is called *Sadhana*, “If the artist performs this exercise, it is artistic. If the farmer performs it, it is agriculture. If the devout practice it, it is spiritual. And it all leads to Achievement!” (116). Mother teaches, someone make efforts for the Master, he is performing a spiritual *Sadhana* as the farmer achieves a crop of corn, and the musician plays a divine raga, and the sculptor carves a perfect piece of sculpture, then the Master’s devotees are achieving the spiritual equivalent. She instructs that while doing something all day long devotee should remember the Master, “ Not his work, not his words, just the Master himself and his love for you. If you do that, I promise you that you will never be sad or hungry or in pain.”(118)



Self realization is a deep feeling which cannot be conveyed in normal words, it merely can be related through some symbolic objects. At the Ashram of Mother, Matteo gets peace of mind. He learns that anger, resentment and jealousy do not change the heart of others. It is love only which changes the world around in positive direction. Apart from the serene, congenial atmosphere from the vibration from the spiritual presence gave him very soothing and divine effect to forget the worldly worries and attune to the frequency devoid of mundane influences. Mother says, “what we do here, we do out of love”(132):

...everyone is busy as a bee over here...so many bees in my hive... so much of the little bee, eh? But is this hive to be empty and dry and useless? Or is it to be filled with honey, a store of good, sweet honey?...I mean honey made from spiritual nectar, nectar to nourish your souls. All organizations are useless, Matteo, useless and dry and empty, if they do not contain the nectar of the spirit. I want it to be rich, rich, rich with this nectar.(134)

Desai gives example of Ramkrishana Paramhansa as to achieve spiritual experience one should not struggle hard because Master does not want his disciple to struggle. RamKrishan Paramhans is a popular yogi of India had the influence of Bengali *bhakti* tradition and is widely known for religious school of thought led to the formation of the Ramakrishna Mission by his chief disciple Swami Vivekananda:

You know the saint Ramkrishna said we should be like kittens—allow the Master to pick you up and carry you. Don't struggle, don't resist. The Master, the Mother—they are the mother cats, they will carry you, the kittens.(118)

Anita Desai, through the Mother, throws light on Yoga's unique method of meditation revealing the result of self realization (Kundalini awakening) due to which people feel all pervading divine power within them:

Divine Force is not in some idol, not in the cross, not even in the book. We know the Divine Force is everywhere...look up at the sky those birds that are flying...Let the Power of the tree and the bird and Master flow into you...feel it go through you like a glowing light...allow it to happen, allow this transformation to happen!. (112)

Journey to Ithaca is a portrayal of several psychological and spiritual results of *Yoga Sadhna* on three people Sophie, Matteo and the Mother. Living in Ashram, Sophie and Matteo live marital life also and Sophie becomes pregnant and gives birth to a boy child. The Mother wants to give the name but Sophie dislikes it and gives names to her son Giacomo. After the birth of Giacomo and in the moments of difficulty, Matteo goes to the Mother and reveals his



sad mental condition, the Mother consoles Matteo in these beautiful lines. Desai's use of imagery and symbol is distinguished here as how she relates Matteo symbolically with lotus:

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)

Major portion of the chapter four is in italics font which shows the ecstasy of self –realization by the Mother in poetry form from the page number 339 to 341, “My body danced, In prayer, in joy, And ardent expectation. I danced my love, my ardour”. (339-340)

Anita Desai reveals a brilliant style of writing, superbly designed using long, or short or complex sentences with brilliant figures of speech, stream of consciousness technique, imagery and symbols, beautiful choice of words and nicely conceived philosophy of India all of which increase the value of the novel.

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