

CULTURAL DILEMMA: EXISTENTIAL CRISIS AMONG DIASPORAS IN *JOURNEY TO ITHACA*

DR. BHAVANA SHRIVASTAVA
English and Foreign Languages
University, Hyderabad. (TS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Existential crisis is a state of mind at which an individual seeks the answer if his life has meaning, purpose, or value where he is living; it may be at various levels - family, country or global. Global level, in which uncommonly people want to know who they are and what is their existence in this world, they are desperate to get truth, true knowledge and migrate from one country to another country to quench their spiritual thrust and when they do not get the answer of this question commonly, normally, they tie to despair or unavoidably negative speculations on purpose in life but if they reaches to their destined place and find the answers then they will certainly be blissful and enlightened whatever be the social conditions. Cultural Dilemma is related to in- between situation where people are lingered in between two places, two worlds, and two conditions-materialistic and spiritual, physical and abstract, where they live they feel an undesired and unwelcomed environment. For a Diasporas, it is difficult to get accustomed to this in between situation or to accept it, and in search of existence they move, if their mind transform in positive way, they get desired and enjoyable existence. On the contrary, if they do not feel contemplate; they face major depressive disorder, loneliness, pressured circumstances in which they find no solution for survival. Both existences are the outcomes of either dissatisfied or positive social interactions.

INTRODUCTION

Diasporas can become the prey of existential crisis when they are provoked by any significant event in the their lives like psychological trauma, marriage, separation, major loss, the death of a loved one, a life-threatening experience, extra marital affair, a new love partner, psychoactive drug use, adult children leaving home or reaching a personally significant age. Those who realize that they must know their true identity and for this they live the life as they want to and those who fail become the prey of extreme forms of loneliness. Anita Desai's

novel *Journey to Ithaca* presents three major figures; Laila- the mother and Matteo and Sophie- the couple, all come Ithaca in search of their true identity and a substantial existence. The novel unravels the struggle to know the Supreme Soul. After coming India from different country, they manifest their travelling at many places of India and find the solution of their problems variously: Laila- the mother, the main protagonist of the novel who transforms from Laila to Lila and lives in the spiritual world of her own desire breaking away all futile confusions of human world of entanglements.

Published in 1995 by Anita Desai-- away from common theme or suffering of women and in the distinguished period an appropriate calculation can be made to evaluate India after reaching to the zenith of spirituality, divine world, the novel *Journey to Ithaca* exhibits her spiritual inclinations, has very clear purpose to achieve, the most important thing is to focus on the achievement and rejection of Western culture or materialistic world and transformation of psyche of three Westerners. The title refers to three journeys in the novel: Journey of Sophie, of Matteo and of the mother—Here Desai poignantly presents the real picture of religious and spiritual picture of Indian in postcolonial society. She presents Indian cultural, nature, Gurus, Aurobindo Ashram, preaching of Mother in the Ashram and how to attain gratification or fulfilment in life. There is the portrayal of the relationships between Matser and their devoted disciples.

This is the fact that closes ties of divine love and happiness is difficult to find in Foreign Countries as divine relationships have disappeared from society. The novel opens with Matteo and Sophie, husband and wife- Matteo from Italy and Sophie from Germany. Sophie wants to take back Matteo in a place where they both can spend time with family and can live together. They both are not happy with their married life. Like the novel, *Cry, the Peacock* Matteo is an ascetic like Gautama whereas Sophie needs worldly pleasure. After coming India, Sophie feels deserted by her husband. Matteo gets busy in finding inner peace and rest, he was since his childhood. He was a failure at school; in the studies and in games too. He was kept at home under the guidance of a tutor. Though they have two children Isabella and Giacomo but Matteo does not feel any attachment to them. They live with their grandparents in Italy.

Matteo comes to India in search of the true Identity and eternal Truth and is detached whereas Sophie has some desires and dreams to fulfil, she wants to live with Matteo. Sophie in this novel suffers as Maya suffers in *Cry, the Peacock* and feels alienation. There are several examples of Sophie's existential predicament, one of them is, "...She missed her friends in Goa and the beaches, but Matteo had brought her to a city where there were no tourist attractions, where the people all seemed as hard and driven as he himself was becoming in their company. Was it for this that they had come to India?" (89)

During her travels, Sophie meets a woman who had been walking a long distance with her sick baby. She had eight children, among whom, seven had died. To pray for the eighth child's life, the woman was going to the shrine in the hope of a miracle, because if the boy child died, "she cannot go back to her husband. His family will blame her".(63) But at that time the baby was in need of urgent attention of doctor and medicine but folks were marching ahead singing with faith *Tukaram Tukaram*. Sophie had no belief in such superstitions of Indian people. In her opinion, to save the life of the child there should be proper medical treatment of the child.

Sophie's existential predicament, feeling of loneliness, alienation, and the tag of a foreigner put her patience to the test, out of which she almost daily rushes to spend her time in a Zoological garden, which she enjoys a lot with wild creatures. She finds a way to enter the zoo without buying an entrance ticket; she enters from the back entrance of the municipal park of which one portion had been fenced off as a zoo, "she found ways of slipping through a gap in the hedge and throwing flirtatious smiles at the gardeners who noticed her unorthodox entry" (89). In the garden Sophie feels infuriated due to some unwanted comments of the onlookers of which young men of which she understands some English words, "Lovely –si- madam, lovely –si-madam, come he-re, my de-urr... Then she could only hope for a gardener to come to her rescue."(90-91) Sophie laments this and requests Matteo to take her to her home, but due to Matteo's inflexibility she has to live in India.

At the initial stage of understanding what India is all about, the couple gets confused in forming an opinion about India, "...Elephants, maharajas—my God, you two, is that what India is to you?" Pierre Eduard rolled his eyes. 'When will people from the West free themselves from Hollywood? Can you think of nothing that is not concrete material, an entertainment?' (40) , But when they meet to a saint who was able to fill the room with fragrance, Sophie prostrated before her and remembers her childhood days of magic.

Matteo is in search of his true identity and the bliss which already resides within him. He is in the process of discovering the ultimate truth. Seeking the answer to the question who am I, he proceeds on the path of self- realization which requires the right guidance. Without the positive help of Pierre Eduard, it was a great challenge for him to differentiate between true and fake mysticism in India. There were a lot of fake saints and yogis who wore white clothes and were earning money in the name of religion:

Without returning his look, the yogi stretched out his hand to point at the notes and coins scattered on the deer skin by the others who had been to see him. When he did so, Matteo noticed the glint of a gold watch strap on his wrist. Twisting his lips, he turned away: why did the yogi who did not need sleep need a watch to tell him the time? (74)

To the couple, everyone had a story to tell about India, Pierre Eduard, one of the early friends and mentors of the couple, helps them in realizing unique ways of spiritualism of India. Pierre Eduard introduces to the couple the real Indian culture and the real spirituality. He differentiates between Western philosophy and Eastern philosophy:

Everyone had a story to tell. Stories swarmed, stories multiplied and proliferated. Sophie was uncertain which story belonged to whom: they droned in her ears like flies or mosquitoes and she listened, smiling, in the haze of smoke in which she lived as in a net. (68)

In Bombay, Sophie meets a yogi named Mr. Pandey. Pierre Eduard describes the incredible saga of the yogi who through the study of yoga lies on the beach sand with his head buried underneath it, for more than half an hour- for full forty minutes and advises them, “it is the spiritual experience for which you must search in India, nothing less” (41). Sophie surprisingly observes Lord Shiva’s figure, “There in a surprisingly large room painted a bright pink under a blue fluorescent light and a framed oleograph of a god with a snake around his neck and a crescent moon in his matted locks”. (42) Mr. Pandey as the spiritual tourist guide of the couple, takes them to several saints, yogis and at last to an ashram.

Matteo dedicates his whole life to understand the mysteries of life and, in the end, we see Matteo as an ascetic, weeping at the tomb of the Mother and Sophie his wife collects all the information of the Mother and fills her life with the colour of happiness, peace and divine love. 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. The novel holds Cultural dilemma-existential crisis among Diasporas within the novel by highlighting the challenges in achieving eternal bliss. In an interview Desai says:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands; it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out ‘the great no,’ who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what their demands are and what it costs to meet them. (*Bande* 19)

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)

Laila in the Ashram in the company of her master achieves her goal, her self identity, existence with Master. 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)

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). 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)

In this novel Anita Desai defines search for true identity through Matteo and the Mother stating that true freedom is love for Krishna. It is the best gift. Material gifts are temporary as they dissipate. The gift of Krishna- *prema*, or love for God, never goes away. It gives a meaningful existence and grows day after day. It is the only real definition of freedom, and the true saints not only of India but also of this world are those who lead others to this kind of freedom. There are many examples of Mother’s discourses which change Matteo’s life and give Matteo inner knowledge to achieve the desired destination

Anita Desai throws light on Yoga and Meditation for self realization due to which people free; their true identity with Supreme Soul , “...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)

Like Siddhartha who becomes Gautama Buddha after gaining knowledge of truth, Matteo gets true peace and inner knowledge in the company of Mother and experiences spiritual bliss, “Bliss! Bliss now, bliss here, forever bliss! (116)

Realizing the importance of faith and belief and spiritual life, Sophie changes her mind and decides to go on a pilgrimage, “Now she knows why the mother went on that pilgrimage, why anyone goes on a pilgrimage, and why she must go too.”(348)

Desai deals with cultural dilemma, existential crisis among diasporas. The aesthetic novel evokes typical Indian atmosphere by using Indian imagery in finding connections in experiences, events and objects from real life. She uses parenthesis as a stylistic device and linguistic technique. R.K. Shrivastava appreciates:

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)

Thus, In *Journey to Ithaca*, Anita Desai focuses on cultural conflict of East and West, proving the proverb wrong that East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet. East has shown the mirror to the people from all the corners those who want to know what their true identity is and what is the value of their existence on this earth. The existence of single entity is not valued till we feel that it is the part of Supreme Soul.

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