



SPIRAL PATH OF SPIRITUAL ATTAINMENT IN ANITA DESAI'S *JOURNEY TO ITHACA*

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ABSTRACT

India has been a symbolic place of solace for the pilgrims since ages. Pilgrims have wandered and suffered in the journey for the search of their soul. Not only the natives but the immigrants too travel to different places of religious importance in India to quench their thirst for truth and God. They migrate from the West to reach Ithaca, an imaginary place of spiritual importance. We explore in this article the experiences of these people who exchange religious and spiritual beliefs as they travel in the light of diaspora writer Anita Desai's novel Journey to Ithaca. Our focus is to bring out how the fake masters or gurus misrepresent the Indian culture, religion and spiritualism. In this article we have discussed that the tricksters misguide the immigrant pilgrims for the sake of money and sell Indian spirituality abroad to make their living. Nevertheless, despite meeting all odds in the beginning, how the immigrant pilgrims find their fulfilment later on and continue their quest for truth and god is argued in this article.

Key-Words Solace, religion, spiritual fulfilment, beliefs, thirst, quench, enlightenment, truth

INTRODUCTION

Ernest Renan discussed in a lecture the idea of what is a nation. The idea of the nation also influences the thoughts and actions of the diaspora, who have migrated to other countries, yet at heart nurture the same values of love and loyalty towards their homeland, and oneness with their countrymen – whether in their homeland or abroad. Renan believed that though race



was important in tribes and old cities, it held less significance in the formation of larger provinces like the Roman Empire. He explains, “A nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history; it is a spiritual family not a group determined by the shape of the earth” (18-19). Mentioning nations such as France, Germany, England and Italy, Renan pointed out that these countries have people of mixed racial origin and hence the importance of race and ethnography in the shaping of a nation is refuted.

Renan explains that there are two essential components of this spiritual principle: the first is the “rich legacy of memories” which the people of a nation share, which is based on the past; the second is the desire to live with each other and pass on the cultural heritage which the people of the nation have received, and which exists in the present (15). Indian Diaspora writer Anita Desai herself has lived this saga and showcases in her novels how a large group of immigrants who have a balanced mind and a loving heart share a kind of collective moral conscience which forms ‘our’ nation inside ‘their’ nation.

In *Journey to Ithaca* as well as in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Desai deals with the problems of people’s longing for spiritual enlightenment in the alien land. Matteo, the protagonist from Italy in *Journey to Ithaca* has a fanatic vision of India as a mythical place. He does not see the real but fantasizes for what he imagines as the real, thereby suffers a great deal.

Since the colonial period, India has fascinated the West in terms of the spiritualism and its socio-cultural panorama that makes it a coveted place for tourists. As the interactions between the West and the East increased over the period of time, the people’s migrations between the two worlds increased. These journeys and migrations of people who exchange religious and spiritual beliefs as they travelled are the focus of works like *Journey to the East*, *A Passage to India*, *The Razor’s Edge* and *Siddharth*. Most Indian diaspora writers like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan have presented the social reality in their fiction, whereas, Desai deals with these social realities from a psychological perspective. Desai believes that women have an enclosed and restricted field of observation as compared to men. She says in an interview with Atma Ram, “This leads to their placing their emphasis differently from men, on having very different sense of values. Whereas a man is concerned with action, experiences and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation” (102). Desai’s novel *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) deals with the concept of an endless journey, a kind of ‘ananta yatra’ which is the basic concept of the Indian philosophy of life.

Ithaca is the name of a mythical place that does not exist geopolitically on the globe. It is a symbolic place of solace for the pilgrims who have wandered and suffered in the journey for the search of their soul. In the present novel, Desai presents Ithaca as a home which is actually a state of homelessness. Edward Said comments in *Orientalism*, “the Orient was a place of pilgrimage, and every major work belonging to a genuine if not always to an



academic Orientalism took its form, style and intention from the idea of pilgrimage there” (168). Pilgrims arrive here but they feel homeless because Ithaca does not offer them the comforts of a home and family. It is an ongoing search for truth and God.

Desai discusses three main characters: Matteo, his wife Sophie and Matteo’s spiritual guru, Laila. All three undertake a chain of journeys to quench their thirst for truth and God. They migrate from the West to reach Ithaca, an imaginary place of spiritual importance in India. Desai emphasises the significance of the term ‘Ithaca’, perhaps that is why she begins the novel with C.P. Cavafy’s poem ‘Ithaca’ with the words:

*Ithaca has given you a beautiful voyage,
Without her, you would never have taken the road,
But she has nothing to give you none.
And if you have found her poor Ithaca has not defrauded you,
With such great wisdom you have gained, with much experience,
You must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.*

The plural Ithacas in the last line suggest that people from anywhere on a quest may find ultimate fulfilment there. It also suggests that there is more than one Ithaca in spiritual India that itself is Ithaca. Paranjape argues that although it is a “metaphoric mismatch” but, “Desai, no doubt, intended India to be a type of Ithaca” (*makarand.com*).

Desai presents the protagonist Matteo in the first part of the novel as a single child of his well-off Italian parents who does not feel attuned to the family atmosphere and the social set-up around him. He is an unhappy soul and does not believe in the mundane pursuits of the world. He feels alienated since his childhood. As Matteo grows old he feels comfort in the company of his tutor Fabian. Fabian advises Matteo to read Hermann Hesse, the German-Swiss novelist and poet who himself had travelled many times to India. Matteo reads Hesse’s poems on Indian philosophy and is strongly influenced by the works. He longs for a pilgrimage to India. Matteo feels indebted to his tutor to have awakened the latent pilgrim within his soul and have guided him to go in search for spiritualism. Matteo makes up his mind to migrate to Ithaca, the spiritual India. Desai brings out this restlessness in Matteo when he looks over a lake, “with the eyes of a man who is planning a long voyage” (27).

Matteo marries Sophie, a confident journalist and the daughter of his parents’ friends after a brief courtship. Soon after their marriage, they set off for the shores of India. They move from place to place in search of a guru. Many times during the journey Matteo comes across ‘fake yogis’ (65) and other ‘ridiculous delusions’ (66). But Matteo is intent on finding a real guru religiously because since childhood he has been looking for a meaningful way of life. After reaching India he feels he has found the path to attain the spiritual values that he has



long aspired for. Matteo reaches an ashram on the Himalayan Mountain and feels joy, peace and deep contentment and becomes the disciple of Laila, the Mother, and head of the ashram. Desai reveals in an interview with *Magda Costa* that the character of Mother is inspired by a real person. She states that the Mother is a, “French woman who set up this ashram in Pondicherry with a very famous Indian sage, Aurobindo” and served there till her nineties. Desai says, “What intrigued me was that, being a foreigner, she became this mystic.” Matteo feels he has now reached the right place and is blessed with the guru with whose blessings and guidance, he would seek the truth.

Sophie accompanies Matteo to India more as an adventurer who is keen to enjoy the natural beauty of India. She is critical of Matteo’s obsession for his guru’s company and his lack of interest in their newly married life. She does not want to travel from ashram to ashram with him, but wants to lead a normal life of a married couple. But Matteo’s quest for truth and spirituality works heavy upon their married life. Only a few months after their arrival, Sophie walks out from this frustrating relationship and joins a drug-tribe on the beach of Goa. But Sophie cannot adjust in the miserable life there and returns to her husband in the ashram. Matteo now keeps her in a strict custody. Sophie lives as a helpless and exhausted sick person in the ashram which appears to her a place no better than a prison. Sophie follows all the rules of the ashram and lives quietly there. In the Mother’s ashram Matteo finds peace, but Sophie remains unaccepted there. She gives birth to two babies in quick succession, but the kids too, cannot bind Matteo and Sophie in love ties. Sophie has no interest in spirituality, so she migrates with her children initially to her parents and then to Matteo’s parents.

As her children get well-adjusted with their grandparents, Sophie finds herself an alien in the materialistic world of the West. Although it was her self-willed decision to quit India, now she feels an unknown fascination for Ithaca and her spiritual journey to Ithaca begins. On receiving the news of Matteo’s illness and hospitalisation, Sophie sets off again for India. She finds fulfilment in enlightening her soul while living in the ashram, hence, after the Mother’s death, Sophie continues her journey. Thus Sophie decides to become a devoted pilgrim like her husband and continue exploring Ithaca. Now she understands that it is an endless voyage of a searching soul without any port to reach. In her interview with Bliss Corrine Demas, Desai states that the narrative skill of this novel is influenced by her mixed parentage. She says that she feels about India as an Indian but thinks about it as an outsider.

Laila, another protagonist from France is the daughter of a Muslim Egyptian named Hamed, a University Lecturer, and Alma, a French teacher. Laila has her own set of discontentment in life. Like Matteo she too, could not adjust with the common ways of family life and the conventional religion of her society since her childhood. Laila has more interest in dancing than in her studies. So her parents send her to Venice for her education and thereafter to Paris thinking that they might get a suitable match if she studies well. This forced dislocation does

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not create her interest in studies either. In Paris, Laila feels strongly attracted towards an Indian dancer who plays the role of Krishna in theatres. She starts feeling a fascination for Eastern occultism and spirituality. Laila joins this troupe and travels to many places in Europe and North America to perform in shows with them.

Laila feels an urge for sublime life and considers the dancer Lord Krishna himself. The person creates an aura that he is Krishna himself, thus, creates interest of many people. Laila gets attracted towards his personality too, and this is her first experience of falling into the hands of a false guru. Laila is so determined to reach her spiritual goals that innocently she mistakes the actor as the real Krishna. However, her devotion to God is evident when she says, “Krishna is my country and my religion” (227). In Paris, Laila reads the lines of the Rig Veda, the holy Indian book, “There is no happiness for him who does not travel” (135). So, she sets on her journey to Ithaca, the spiritual India and experiences a series of betrayals and emotional trauma in the early days of her arrival in India. But her sincere devotion helps her to attain her goal and she reaches the ashram in the Himalayas and finds her true master there. She finds joy, peace and a harmonious environment there. There she continues her spiritual journey and devotes herself to the service of the ashram and her master who guides all the disciples towards truth and God. After the death of the master, Laila becomes the Mother of the ashram.

Desai, as a diaspora writer, satirizes the character of the actor Krishna, who sells Indian spirituality abroad to make his living. She does not give this man a name, but through his character and his troupe who organize shows travelling far and off all over Europe and America, Desai brings out how the fake masters misrepresent the Indian culture, religion and spiritualism. Desai portrays them as tricksters who for the sake of money misguide the natives of the other countries calling themselves Krishna. For quick professional gains they curtail the lengthy ballets to “brief five-and ten-minute sketches,” that the people of the host country are never aware of (254). They experiment with variations in the Radha-Krishna dance putting in Eastern touches. The troupe mixes the local dance forms with the original form of Radha-Krishna and thus makes a farce of the original form. As Laila realizes this, her illusions about the actor Krishna are shattered. She has by now completely dedicated her life to the worship of Lord Krishna, and becomes, “stiff with self-consciousness, understanding that this dance had nothing to do with any religious beliefs or spiritual exercise, Indian or otherwise” (255). Through the character of the dancer Krishna, Desai points out the follies of such troupes who violate the originality of their culture and heritage and mint money in name of spirituality.

Desai critiques the orthodox and superstitions practised in the Hindu society. However, at the same time, she also highlights the magnanimity of Vedantic Hinduism. She also draws attention to the caste system prevalent in India. S.K. Biswas comments upon Desai’s

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presentation of the caste system that, “controls spiritual behaviour of the Hindus in India” (10). Desai argues that her novels are written from an observer’s perspective only and do not claim an authentic representation of the Indian society. James Vinson states that Desai’s, “novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character” but, they are her attempts to grasp and shape the common aspects of life (348).

Desai projects the real India where the Brahmins hold an upper position as compared to the other castes. She brings out an instance where a poor lady refuses to accept the orange juice that Sophie offers to her doubting upon her caste. Sophie is a modern girl and a journalist by profession; she does not appreciate the caste system and the superstitions that prevail in the Indian society. She has a progressive outlook about religion. She has been a critic of Hindu religion and spirituality in the early days of her stay in India, but she is also a critic of her own religion. Sophie returns to her parents leaving Matteo behind in India, and Sophie’s mother wants her to follow their ways of practising religion. But Sophie refuses to do so and argues with her mother, “No, I did not leave India and all its superstitions and rituals to come here and submit to the tribal rites of Europe” (145). It shows that Sophie is not ready to give herself up to the religious practices that are irrational and regressive.

Desai portrays all the three major characters in *Journey to Ithaca* as victims of deceit and uncertainty in the beginning of their search for Truth, but they all find their fulfilment later on and continue their quest for truth and god. Matteo has a number of bitter experiences reposing his trust in fakirs and yogis who turn out to be fakes later on. Matteo ultimately finds solace in the Mother’s ashram. Laila, the devotee of Krishna changes her name to Lila of Krishna saying, “Laila, Lila, Laila, Lila, Krishna, Krishna, Krishna Lila” (192). She also falls in the hands of the false teacher who calls himself the real Krishna and plays the role of Krishna for monetary gains. When his falsehood is revealed to her she expresses her disappointment by telling him, “You have shown me devotion to worldly success, to financial gain, to fame – not to the true light for which I came” (276). Initially, Sophie does not have a high opinion of the Mother, even though her husband regards her as guru. Through the eyes of a journalist, Sophie looks at the Mother and takes her to be a hypnotist or a magician. Sophie even sets her mind to bring down the Mother from the high pedestal that her disciples have set her on. Ironically, after her death, Sophie takes her place in the ashram and herself becomes the Mother of the ashram. Desai thus focuses on the vicissitudes of life.

Desai touches upon the issues of orthodox, superstitions and malpractices in Hindu society in *Journey to Ithaca*. She also brings in the positive aspect of religious practices which gives the message of joy and truth to the society.



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