

**JOURNEY FOR ENLIGHTENMENT:
A STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S *JOURNEY TO ITHACA***

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Abstract:

*People embark on journeys with different motives; for pleasure, for entertainment or for work. There are also people, who travel for enlightenment and illumination; they are spiritual travelers. Matteo and Liala, the protagonists of Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* are two such people, who travel to satisfy their spiritual quest. They are ordinary people, who move towards spiritual depths to explore the meaning and nature of reality and also of illusion: two contrasting worlds of ideas and beliefs. It is a saga about soul's journey towards enlightenment and awakening. This is a story of multiple quests made by three different individuals Matteo, Sophie and Liala from three different countries Italy, Germany and Egypt respectively. *Journey to Ithaca* is a manifesto of Oriental philosophy, Vedanta and Upanishads. In this novel Anita Desai evokes spiritual India 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.*

Key Words: *Spirituality, Enlightenment, Journey, Quest, Materialism, Humanity, Values.*

Today in the age of globalization and consumerism man is running behind all materialistic things leaving his inner self empty and neglected. Still in the midst of all material abundance and comforts he suffers insecurity, alienation and emptiness in spirit. In this modern world man suffers not only from external calamities, but also from inner crises. Today we are in a period of science and technology and more concern about physical and materialistic things. We recognize people with their outer appearance, position, power or designation but not with inner qualities. But humanity is far beyond of all these things. Person is different from position or prosperity. So for the welfare of the society and humanity we need to pay attention on this confusion and search for clarification.

The only way to get an explanation for this uncertainty is spirituality as a way of life. It gives capacity to see beyond physical and material to the transcendental and mystical. Spirituality is to live a pure, perfect and balanced life. As we all know knowledge is power and purity is strength, spirituality gives one the moral strength to stand up to one's self in times of any crises. It gives the knowledge of divinity to accept situations and persons without any conflict and cultivates the qualities of truth, love, peace, and harmony with in one self and leads to be self contented and more humanistic. These inherent qualities need not be taught or learnt; rather they must be emerged or evoked from inside and later on developed and practiced as one's life style. So to unveil these divine qualities one should meditate every day. Faith and meditation are the two skills needed to have that vision of spiritual truth. Meditation is nothing but to empty one's mind without any thoughts and create connectivity with that divine power (god) and imbibe the bliss of divinity within one's self. This is not a ritual related to any religion or community rather it is a journey of soul and humanity towards perfection and enlightenment.

Journey to Ithaca is a novel unique in its theme since it is neither physical nor psychological but spiritual. The novel opens with two quotations--the poem *Ithaca* by C.P. Cavafy.... "Always keep Ithaca Fixed in your mind, to arrive there is your ultimate goal".... and a line by Milan Kundera, "Things exist in their essence even before they are materially realized and named" (Pg-9). Both are indicative of the novel's

thematic thrust, while the title encapsulates the gist of the novel. By reading the above poem, we can sense that Ithaca is not a specific place but a symbolic representation suggesting the achievement of goals that people set in their lives and the journey to Ithaca is the quest to make one's dreams come true. According to Greek mythology Ithaca is a small Island among many Greek Islands that we find in Homer's *Odyssey*, and reaching that Island is Odysseus, the hero's ultimate goal, which keeps him alive in spite of several dangers in course of his journey. If we take the lines of Kundera, they are related to the protagonists of this novel, Matteo and Liala, as the novel dramatizes their quest in their strange worlds and their realization of the truth which already exists.

Journey to Ithaca is a novel based on man's journey towards enlightenment. Anita Desai the Author of this novel is an eminent writer of Indian English fiction, who in this novel tries to help ordinary people in the present crises ridden society move towards awareness and existence through spirituality. Anita Desai is a great analyst of Psychological insights and inner concerns. Her novels depict the kaleidoscopic image of the minds of her characters with a mesmerizing art. Her keen observation of emotions and feelings add greater debts to her themes. She represents finest blend of Indian and European sensibilities. Her novels are reflective of social realities which she depicts through a psychological perspective but does not look at them as a social reformer. Her earlier novels revolve around woman's quest for identity, the repression she faces within the family and society, marital disharmony, generation conflicts and anti-Semitism but her later novels focus on the spirit of nationality, social problems existing in the contemporary society, east-west cultural collision, Vedanta and Philosophy.

In this novel India has been depicted symbolically as Ithaca, that celestial city which conveys a positive message to its pilgrims, who are surrounded by different ambiguities of life. Here its culture is shown as a way of life that treats the mentally ill people. Thus the major characters Matteo and Laila, who are symbolically described as intellectual pilgrims, are on a spiritual adventure to that celestial city for self realization. In spite of living in adverse conditions and various kinds of temptations testing them they take the journey of pains and difficulties and ultimately reach their goal. They attain this balance of mind only after self examination.

Matteo a wealthy Italian, a man of sensibility, disappointed in his life. Right from the beginning he is a problem child to his family. He exhibits signs of worldly failure. He is disinterested in studies and withdraws from school. Though he is wealthy he finds no happiness in money or in materialistic comforts. He is a detached and aloof personality since his childhood, who loves to live in his own world. Like an outsider he is always lonely and ill at ease in this world he lives. His father engages a tutor to teach him English. His name is Fabian who acknowledges his inner trauma and gives him a book "*Journey to the East*" written by Herman Hesse. Matteo fascinated by that book comes to India on a spiritual quest "to find India to understand India and the mystery that is at the heart of India". (Pg-54) His wife Sophie, a German, practical, worldly woman and a confident journalist joins him with a different intension of enjoying life in India. Here we can see the polarization of their attitudes. Matteo's alienation and escape from his family and world effects even his matrimonial relation. He finds an abysmal barrier between himself and the outer world. Due to ideological differences, Matteo does not find happiness and satisfaction with his wife Sophie. He tells Sophie, "it is spiritual experience for which you must search in India". (Pg-36) But for him too the meaning of spirituality is unknown. He gets into blind faith that wearing a torn kurtha pyjama and chappals, takes him close to that supreme power. Ignorant of real suffering and real joy he oscillates between false kind of imagination and unhappiness.

With that ignorance he reaches India with his wife and shuttles from one ashram to other. He encounters many fake sadhus and gurus and has to face many humiliations but not able to get that enlightenment and bliss. His conflicts persist and the sense of integration seems to be nowhere near him. His search for eternal truth makes him vulnerable. At last he lands up in an ashram run by a woman called Mother. (A spiritual guru) His journey ends in total surrender to the Mother with the conviction that "she is

the one who can reveal the unknown to me". (Pg- 141) Her speech transports him to a unique experience an experience of unity, the unity of the physical with the spiritual, the dark with the light, the human with the natural. (Pg.99) Matteo enthralled by the environment of Mother's ashram wants to remain there forever. He finds the peaceful ambience of the ashram quite different from the other ashrams and believes that he got the right guru. In his obsession with his newly attained guru, any time spent away from her seems to him as wasted time, empty time, and dead time. . . . In the company of Mother everything comes alive. He finds in the image of the Mother the reason for living. (Pg-108) Matteo strongly believes that the mystery of life can be revealed only in the presence of the divine Mother. He is over powered by what mother speaks or suggests. He says her presence heightens, and illuminates the experience of living as no one else does...and when I leave her I am falling down in to darkness.(pg -141) But for Sophie she is only a woman who is snatching her husband from her. She feels Mother is a magician. Here starts the conflict between sacred love of Matteo towards Mother and earthly love of Sophie for Matteo. For Matteo India stands for bliss love and light but for Sophie it is symbol of imprisonment, death, darkness and destruction.

Sophie has come to India with no intension to find god or guru or truth. She comes to India just to enjoy the delights and beauties of the country. She never wants to move from one ashram to another and be the object of many humiliations. She wants the normal life of western couple. But like many Indian monks Matteo too neglects his responsibilities towards his family. He does not even care for his children, wife or parents. For him now those are a nightmare world of physicality. (pg.102) But spiritual life does not mean renunciation of responsibilities. Disgusted with the attitude of Matteo, after giving birth to second child she goes back to Italy with her children but soon her love for Matteo brings her back to India. To rescue Matteo from Mother's clutches she tries to unveil the past of Mother. Mother, as she suspects though looks Indian is not an Indian. (JI-125) Sophie tries to dig Mother's past to confirm her as a frail mortal being that might have been hidden behind the impressive garb of the guru.

In her quest she finds a girl's painful and turbulent and anguished journey for supreme joy and beauty. Mother, who is actually an Egyptian-Muslim named Liala, born in an academic family in Alexandria. Her father Hameed is a university lecturer and mother, Amla a French Teacher. As a child she too, like Matteo, a head strong and independent one causing headache to her parents and teachers. Since her childhood she yearns with her entire body and soul for some vision of supreme joy and beauty. So she draws herself towards that direction where ever her passion takes her. As a student she is disinterested in studies. So her parents sent her to Paris for further studies. There she gets entranced by eastern occultism and spirituality.

Determined to discover the peace of her soul she propels herself into a new direction and enters into an oriental dance troop. Enchanted by the mystic atmosphere she mistakes the dancer Krishna as god Krishna and gets attracted towards him. He is an Indian dancer and famous for his role of Lord Krishna. With much labor she tours Europe, North America before coming to India. After coming to India neglected by her friend Krishna, physically sick and disappointed she disappears from there and lands in an ashram at the feet of Himalayas with the desire to be free of this world to escape into a better and brighter one. She is always conscious of her goal. Her strong conviction that there must be a master, a spiritual leader to show her luminous wisdom and answer to her queries finally enables her to find him in that ashram. In her staunch belief she reveals,

I left home so long and so far behind, that I cannot return to it. I cannot believe that the dreams and hopes that propelled me on my travels and brought me to India had no truth and no power and were merely delusions. Somewhere there must be one who is mighty and wise who will open up to me cosmic infinity, where I may dwell in peace and my search for eternal knowledge and the supreme light. Some where there must be one who is tranquil and patient and comprehends all things and conquers all forces and against whom no evil can prevail. Some where there must be the one who can show me the luminous wisdom I know exists, the vision that I crave the answer to my questions

that will assuage my hunger and thirst with love and joy. Some where my master must exist. (Pg-280)

The diary that Sophie collects from the dance master reveals her indefatigable spirit amidst harrowing experiences in an unfriendly environment. At the initial stage of her journey in her ignorance she mistakes what is only human for almighty and supreme. Now she has the eternal light setting her on fire. "I was on fire, the tree was on fire, light blazed and the whole sky was illuminated." (Pg-286) Her earlier attempts to seek through dance the harmony between the body and the mind, thought and action brings her only disharmony. Now her soul gets satisfied. In that satisfaction she says "love filled my every limb with its nectar and I was Radha who beheld at last the true Krishna". (Pg- 291) There ends the most turbulent phase of her quest providing her bliss, wisdom and enlightenment and her great transformation from Laila to the Mother. Her spiritual journey has nothing to do with religious rituals or institutionalized religion. She discovers that personal realization of oneself can only come from one's inner consciousness. Now she can feel that cosmic spirit in each and every particle of this world. In describing Liala's growth as Mother Author seems to be restoring her own understanding about India and enlightenment. She seems to make people believe that the fundamental need of the world is far deeper than any social, political or economic readjustment. It is rather a spiritual awakening, a recovery of faith in god. Faith based on experience and action. Again with the life of mother, she also tries to suggest that saints are not stainless glass figures by birth. Rather they achieve it by many sufferings and sacrifices. And whatever they will get they spread in the society everywhere.

Mother after the death of guru of that ashram becomes head of that place paving the way for many quests. After knowing the truth about Mother when Sophie returns she realizes the futility of her quest. Since she finds that Mother already died and Matteo disappeared into mountains to pursue his search. At last she gets self realization and waits for Matteo forever. In that way her one quest ends and other starts. So in that way each of the above mentioned three persons undertake the literal and metaphorical journey to Ithaca having the joy of home coming at last.

In this novel Anita Desai gives a view of spiritual living, through the character of Mother who teaches her disciples the values of life. She preaches that the divine force is everywhere and knowledge means to realize that truth. She exhorts them not to feel sad or exhausted but keep smiling. The purpose of our existence in this ashram is to experience fully, to be fully. (Pg-100) She asks her disciples to find pleasure in serving the humanity and to adopt the path of selfless duty. In the ashram she treats all equally, believing the existence of the eternal truth in the hearts of all. The gist of the Mother's philosophy is that the soul progress from individual body to community from community to universe and from universe to infinity. This way of life leads man to a state of pure joy. She advises her devotees to try to attain the complete consciousness in ones inner self. This precisely is the most needful and important business of our lives as no one can experience the depth of bliss without aware of oneself.

Mother also preaches that in his consciousness man must clearly realize some central truth which will give him the perspective of his life. Because truth is the bright eternal light that takes the man to immortality. She gives various examples to Matteo to make him aware of the reality in life. She advises him to live like a lotus flower which is not wetted by water or stained by mud though it grows among them.(Pg-138) That means living in this materialistic world and accepting all family responsibilities, he should detach himself from them to glorify his soul. She says his faith can bear fruit only when he perceives the things from his mind's eye. According to her, any ordinary being can attain knowledge and eternal bliss by performing routine work. She says bliss can enter, only when your mind focus on that. (Pg-116) She gives example of bee hive and busy bee. She asserts that everyone in the ashram work in order to fill the hive with sweet nectar. In the same way if one wants to nourish one's soul it should be filled with spiritual nectar because all organisms are useless, dry and empty if they do not contain the nectar of spirit. So be rich

with the nectar of spirit. Here nectar symbolizes the essence of life (Pg-118)

Talking about the devotion she suggests that clarity of mind is the prime requirement to the way of bhakti. Therefore when one is conscious and perceives the inner being that transcends his ego, and has its deeper affinity with all and leads to the way of love. In that way whomsoever one loves, in him one finds one's own soul in the highest sense. Thus love is the height bliss that man can use for his transformation from human to divine. In her ashram she teaches the same. "Here we teach only love; here we dedicate ourselves to love. What we do here, we do out of love." (Pg-117) But she says further that without serving the humanity it is difficult to become a devotee or get that love of divinity. She believes the motto work is worship and she asks everyone to work hard without expecting the fruit of that work and suggests no work is inferior or superior (Pg-120). She assigns duties to all the devotees in the ashram and explains them this effort, this endeavor this exercise calls sadhana. If the artist performs this exercise it is artistic. If the farmer performs it, it is agricultural and if the devotee practice it is spiritual and it all leads to the achievement of self consciousness. (Pg-98) She preaches Matteo the Indian theology of nishkama karma, a higher way of life to work without desiring the fruit of that work. In ashram everyone works and lives together without expecting any profit or pay they do all kinds of works just for their livelihood. But Sophie speaks of the western ideology of work. That means work is work and which should bear fruits.

Anita Desai through this novel tries to prove that, vision of truth is not in religion. She philosophizes that god is not in a temple or in the holy book. Working on the universal norms of life she follows the secular image of India by making Mother confess about the presence of god in the heart of man and refuses to accept any kind of formalism for the realization of ultimate truth. She feels it crosses all the barriers of gender, religion and nationality. It is only related to humanity.

It is not like going to church, not like going to the temple mosque or vihara. We have no religion. Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, and makes one fearful. We turn our back to religion. We do not take off our shoes or put on hats. We come as we are. We know the master does not care what we wear, how we sit, what we sing (Pg-93).

Matteo a "westerner" comes to "East" in search of truth and accepts a woman who is an Egyptian Muslim as his spiritual deity. And Mother comes to India and accepts a great sage of Hindu religion as the representative of God. All these three characters are in quest of their purpose and overcome the barrier of gender, religion and nationality. In this novel Anita Desai symbolizes India as Ithaca, a celestial city where man wanders in quest for reaching ones home land that is his inner self. She describes it as a home for long wandering, long suffering, searching souls for home and identity. She exemplifies India only because this is the land which recognizes the significance of the journey within, a land with thought, vision and philosophy. Thus the protagonists of the novel Matteo, Laila and Sophie are on pilgrimage to Ithaca for enlightenment. As the novel starts with Cavafy's poem *Ithaca* translated by Raedolvin.

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.

To arrive there is our ultimate goal.

But do not hurry the voyage at all.

It is better to let it last for long

Ithaca has given you a beautiful voyage

And if you had found her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.

With such wisdom you have gained, with so much experience

You must surely have understood by then what Ithaca mean (3).

'Ithaca' stands for a disciple's spiritual goal. However long and wide the 'journey' might be, 'Ithaca' should be the focus and the ultimate destination. One should not hurry through the voyage at all; it is better

to let it last for long years. That means what is important is not the reaching but rather the Journey itself.

Besides, in *Journey to Ithaca*, Anita Desai visualizes the other side of India, a third world country with people in poverty, hunger, dirt, fake Sadhus and money minded gurus who rob people in the name of religion. She points out the orthodox, superstitious, inhuman vulgar practices of Hindu society. Matteo encounters all these negative facts of the country while on his spiritual journey as he feels that soul must pass through pain and agony for its purification. Matteo ones read in Katha Upanishads about the difference between path of joy and path of pleasure and determine to follow the path of joy against the path of pleasure. (Pg-32) Matteo realizes that the mystery he has long been searching is neither bookish knowledge nor blind faith but experience of eternal bliss and finding the truth but not achieving any human desire or goal.

When someone is seeking it happens quite easily.

That he only sees what he is seeking.

That he is unable to find anything because

He is thinking of the thing he is seeking.

Seeking means to have a goal.

But finding means to be free have no goals (JI-54).

Journey to Ithaca describes the journey of Matteo from what is false to what is truth; from ignorance to wisdom, from communion with men to communion with god or god like earthly beings. The novel narrates the journey of Laila from false Krishna to the true Krishna, from earthly love to divine love, from religion to no religion and finally from physical experience to spiritual experience. It also describes the journey of Sophie from Germany to India; from misunderstanding to understanding of Mother and from sexual passion to sensible decision.

Thus Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* deals with the predicament of modern man caught in the conflict between "what is" and "what ought to be". It shows the cause of conflict and fragmentation and how to recover as integrated being. It discovers the way of natural wholeness of the soul and explains how to experience it in one's day to day existence. It is the state of total love freedom and understanding. It also shows a transcend way of life and declares that spirituality is not one of the ways of living but this is the way of living for a better society, a society with values and ethics. Spirituality is not static. It is a process or a journey within oneself, a soul's lifelong journey towards awakening which comes into being spontaneously when one aspires for it.

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