



## Quest For Truth in Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca

### KEYWORDS

Quest, Vedantic knowledge, Indian Philosophy, Cross, Cultural complexity confrontation  
Wisdom, Truth, the East-West encounter.

**APARIMITA MISHRA**

**ABSTRACT** *This paper attempts to explore and examine the Quest theme in Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca; Matteo Sophie, the major protagonist search for enlightenment and awakening. The central issue is not the search for identity of existence, but search for Truth, Ultimate reality, beauty, joy ecstasy or whatever form truth has. Desai gives an poetic expression to Indian Philosophy. The Vedas which constitute the essential foundation of the entire spiritual tradition of India. It attempts to highlight through the study of the novel, the journey motif and the cross-cultural complexities and confrontations that such journey envisages.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Anita Desai shines as one of the most important Indian writers of today. She occupies a distinct and distinctive place in the realm of contemporary Indian English fiction. Each novel in its own way adds a new dimension to Indian English Literature. She mainly illustrates the integral drama of human life and concentrates on its basic facts exploring the deeper psychic and mental status of the protagonist. This paper focuses on the theme of spiritual Quest in Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca. Journey to Ithaca marks a departure from the Desai Cannon. It introduces a different style and a different subject than what has kept the author preoccupied so far. What keeps her pre-occupied is the idea of a persistent journey something like the concept of "ananta yatra" which is embedded in the Indian Philosophy in life. Ananta Yatra, a well known upanishadic term charaybeti means go ahead don't stop. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar puts it "The intolerable grapple with thoughts, feelings and emotions (464).

In most of her novels from "Cry the Peacock" to Fasting, Feasting she makes known to us the unconscious motifs of psyche, the problem of human relationship the protagonist's quest for identity, but in Journey to Ithaca she makes the departure from the vision of a different kind of reality that can sustain our spiritual struggle. Thus she makes some defining and deciding movements in her structural and visionary perspectives. The seeds for higher human values was sown in 'clear light of the Day' and 'Baumgartner's Bombay' but they sprout to fullness in 'Journey to Ithaca'. The central issue is not the search for identity of existence, but a 'Search for truth, ultimate reality, beauty, joy, ecstasy or whatever form truth has.

The novel dramatizes the timeless theme of spiritual quest. Through the journey Desai wants to explore "the long fascination of the west with Indian spirituality, The two contrasting views of spiritual pursuits – believing and questioning. Indian Philosophy is steeped in religious and spiritual ideals and culture is the underlying foundation of tradition and beliefs that helps a person relate to the world around and all other things that people learn that make up the 'way of life' of any society. It is passed on from one generation to the next through the process of socialization. Religion forms the very core of Indianness and it means 'oneness' the realization of one's own self. The journey motif is undertaken by three different characters

on different planes of existence with an intention in search of the root of spirituality which is highly symbolic. Matteo is depicted by Desai as an intellectual pilgrim in the quest for reality, the quest for Truth. As the novel unfolds Matteo the only child exhibits signs of worldly failure from the beginning. He fails to conform to the domestic or social norms of the world. Reticent and withdrawn Matteo found the villa with its velvet hangings and tapestries stifling. He wants to be alienated, his entire presence seemed to be made up of silence. The life in the school disturbed him. His parents work hard to bring him to practical work and business but all efforts were in vain. His behaviour at school and home symbolically exhibits that the seeds for higher values of life had already been there (i.e. In his mind) in their essence even before they were materially realized and named'. The transformation comes to Matteo when his tutor Fabian presents him a book "The Journey to the East" by Herman Hesse. By reading the book Matteo's soul begin to stir and as Vivekananda writes – Each soul is potentially divine". He is restless, he wants to run away to escape from the worldly pleasure. He moulds his mind towards the philosophy of Vedanta and Indian Philosophy and he embarks with Sophie his wife on a spiritual adventure to India "to find India, to understand India and the mystery that is in the heart of India" (57).

India has enchanted the west ever since its fame reached their shores, especially after colonisation not only for its alluring skills, muslins gems and spices but also for its "arsha sanskara". The post-war unrest in the west has directed many a disturbed soul in the magic of India.

Matteo, search for India proved to be difficult because of lack of knowledge about India and the absence of a proper Guru. Guru has a special connotation in the Indian context, the Guru is not just a teacher or expert but one's spiritual leader who guides the disciple towards truth and God. The Gurus are the representative of the Lord, who are the helms man to carry one safely and easily beyond the worldly ocean. Wonderful is the power of the touch of the Guru's hand. The real Guru is one who fixes us in our nature and carries us beyond the ocean of worldly existence (Sai Sacharita) (59 – 60).

The subtle body consisting of thoughts and desire which cannot be burnt by the gross fire is destroyed by the mere touch of the Guru's hand. Matteo learns Sanskrit and read

Katha Upanishad, Vedas. For Matteo India was an entity.

Moving from one ashram to another ashram, distracted and deceived by series of fake yogis (65). He steps on the first step of the ladder leading to spirituality in an ashram in the Himalayan Peak where a woman is the head of the ashram. His disturbed soul finds solace in the lap of the mother. He seems to reach his goal under the blessings of the mother, the supreme power – women, assuming different forms and shapes, the three aspects of feminine personality – One who gives birth, one who rears and the one who destroys. The concept of Shakti power is the central to the universe, Kali the divine and destructive, Parvati, sweetness, Durga, the eternal Mother. Like the Indian Trinity, Brahma (the Generator), Vishnu (the Operator), and Mahesh the (Destroyer). Matteo ends his journey with the total surrender to the mother. Sophie, on the other hand, a German, is a confident journalist, worldly, practical, believes in logical explanation of things though not interested in spiritual ways but proceeds to India with Matteo like any other western adventurers to explore the mountains and to enjoy the exotic East.

She too visited many an ashram, first out of curiosity and later on out of compulsion. Sophie does not appreciate the process of moving and thinks it is useless and meaningless. She feels like a beast in a cage (79) very unhappy, she married Matteo to remain together to lead a happy married normal life but for Matteo it was different, who was looking for a meaningful life from his childhood days. Sophie does not want to travel all over India seeking enlightenment and in context to see the world as it is. When their son is born she wants to move back and tried to convince Matteo. She is disgruntled with the dirt, the disease and the poverty of India. These emotions contrasting and clashing are brought out beautifully by Desai. Sophie suspects the spiritual authority of the Mother and thus she enquires all about the past of the Mother, while the Mother was the Guru for Matteo, to Sophie she was a magician. Her queries 'why can we be not together again at home with the children?. Her queries about the Mother disturbs Matteo but the widening gulf between them aggravates her questing spirit. She wants to go behind that and to find out who the mother really is, how she came here and why" (153). She wants to dig out the past of the Mother. She learns the spiritual Guru's past as Laila a girl's long tenuous, impassioned and painful journey. She was in search for some vision of Supreme Joy. Her life is a saga of a yearning soul. Her childhood days is symbolically related to Matteo's childhood. As Matteo fails to live up the standards and ideals of his Italian parents Laila too fails the

expectation of her parents. She answers to her parents I go down the street, I turn a corner, I don't know where I am ..... Do?. I do nothing. I walk, I play, I look. But I do nothing" (18). She rebels against the traditional code and leaves her home in search for spiritual experience. She feels like a prisoner in her own house. She always took her life as a journey to the Abode of Bliss. She had set one goal and that was to experience the presence of God. She was a dancer. Dance for Laila was not only stamping, jumping and swirling in motions but it was something else. She wanted to express through her dance. "Whatever it is the music express and that is sometimes joy, sometimes grief, sometimes despair. (23).

She came across Madame Lucan book shop. There were different books, Rig Veda, Samhita, Bhagavad Gita. The sacred book of the East. She took out Attreya Brahmanan of the Rig Veda from the shelf and started to read the book ....

There is no happiness ..... Therefore wonder .....

By reading books she equipped herself with the knowledge of the Eastern Gods and Goddesses. She went on dancing and visited America, Italy .... She became famous but her heart desired something deeper and higher values. She danced with ecstasy, the ecstasy knowing that time had come – A coolness touched her heart. From Laila she becomes Lila – the manifestation of God. The truth was inside her. As the essence of Vedas which contains the universal truths discovered by enlightened people. The master and the devotee became one and she became the supreme of the ashram.

From time immemorial man is in search of infinite knowledge, infinite bliss infinite peace and eternal life. Though these things are present within himself all the time. Vedanta declares that what we are searching for is within us. The nature of the soul is Sachchidananda – existence – knowledge – bliss absolute. Her life becomes a mission. She becomes Guru for Matteo. She becomes the Mother.

There ends the turbulent phase of her quest providing her bliss, wisdom, enlightenment and her transformation from Laila to the Mother.

Thus the novel seems to suggest that it is not the end or the fruit, that determines the success of the quest, but the journey itself which provides one with great illumination.

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