

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 10 : 1 January 2010

ISSN 1930-2940

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Papers Presented in Karunya University International Seminar

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S. B. Bhambar, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Anita Desai's *Journey To Ithaca*

Anita Desai's *Journey To Ithaca* A Manifestation of Vedantic Knowledge

S. B. Bhambar, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Manifestation of Wisdom

Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) is a manifestation of the wisdom of Oriental philosophy as Desai turns to Vedanta and Upanishads to convey her vision of spirituality.

In *Journey to Ithaca* Anita Desai presents a transcendental vision where Matteo and Laila's journey acquires a symbolic undertone. The spiritual quest theme culminates into a transcendental experience which is quite difficult to communicate in ordinary words.

Innate Empathy for Ordinary People to Reach Spiritual Heights

Anita Desai, an eminent personality in the sphere of Indian English literature, seems to have an innate zeal to help ordinary people move towards some awareness of the depths of spiritual development which forms the central symbolic theme of the novel *Journey to Ithaca*.

In spite of living among adverse conditions and various kinds of temptations Matteo and Laila ultimately reach their goal of self-realization.

As the process of self-realization or spiritual fulfillment is quite difficult to convey in ordinary words, Desai has turned to nature symbolism to communicate the same. This lends the novel a deep spiritual vision. Desai projects it through the use of the symbols and images. The major symbols and images used by Desai are namely the image of journey, mountain, water, crows, lotus, fire, rain, river and the symbolic names of characters as well as other similar devices.

Journey to Ithaca

Journey to Ithaca encapsulates the wisdom of Oriental philosophy as Desai turns to Vedanta and Upanishads.

In *Journey to Ithaca* Anita Desai, a philosophically inclined novelist, attempts to explore the meaning and nature of reality and also of illusion as two contrasted worlds of ideas and beliefs. Through the spiritual journey of Matteo and Laila (the Mother) a whole range of the philosophy and thought of the East is subtly explored as a way of life, as a breath of existence.

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Anita Desai's *Journey To Ithaca*

Matteo and Lila

In the novel Matteo and Lila are presented as intellectual pilgrims in the quest for reality, the quest for truth, the search for the eternal verities implicit in India's great spiritual heritage. They, thus, dramatically and symbolically re-enact the spiritual adventures of the ancients in their quests for truth.

Symbolism in Creative Writing

Symbolism in one form or another has been used by nearly every great novelist and poet. According to W.H. Auden, "A Symbol is felt to be much more before any possible meaning is consciously recognized, i.e. an object or event which is felt to be more important than reason can immediately explain" (Auden, 1950: 21). This is true with Anita Desai. The true success of Desai's symbolic presentation of ideas is that it stimulates the unconscious or sub-conscious apprehension of ideas. It takes us to different heights and depths of meanings.

The self-realization of Matteo and Lila becomes possible only after intense spiritual conflicts and moral awareness. Many obstacles and distractions come in the way of their spiritual journey, which are dispelled finally. They attain spiritual liberation and balance of mind only after self-examination, self-exploration and heart-searching, which is very similar to the Hindu belief as explained in Patanjali's Yoga-sutras. Her *Journey to Ithaca*, thus, shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility.

In her *Journey to Ithaca*, Desai gives poetic expression to Indian philosophy. Thus the whole book has symbolic undertone that provides the novel its final meaning.

Meaning of Journey

The symbolic title suggests the search for the fundamental truth of life, the Reality embedded in the complex fabric of existence. In the context of 'Journey' Gangeshwar Rai's observation is significant. He observes, "Journey has been used right from the days of Homer to symbolize man's spiritual quest" (Rai, 1983: 98).

The major characters in the novel try to seek something and therefore they are in search of the spirit. It is their quest that matters much. The title of the novel itself is indicative of this quest. Further, 'Ithaca', too, is defined in the same sense.

Rai defines 'Ithaca' as "Ithaca is back home or the celestial city" (Ibid: 98). Anita Desai, like Greene and Conrad, pleads for a return to the bareness simplicity (back home/Ithaca), instinctive friendliness, feeling rather than thought and start again.

In this context A.K. Bachchan observes, "Journey to Ithaca is a journey where Ithaca ceases to be a specific place. Ithaca is the symbol of that unfailing beacon which eternally

calls man to wander to be in quest of spiritual truth, heart's truth, a quest for reaching one's homeland, his inner self" (Bachchan, 2004 : 161).

Thus, the major characters in the novel – Matteo, Laila and Sophie – are on pilgrimage to Ithaca i.e. to the celestial city, to the lighthouse, to a beacon, which eternally calls man to wander to be in quest of spiritual truth.

Homecoming and Individual's Pursuit for Freedom and Truth

In the novel India emerges to be 'Ithaca' or a religious 'space', capable of offering some positive messages in spite of all its ambiguities. Desai has used the image of journey to present the higher vision of human life. Ithaca has emerged through time as an archetypal image of homecoming, and has been widely used (from Tennyson's *Ulysses*) by European writers as such. In the present novel, too, Ithaca emerges as an image of homecoming as the journey undertaken by the Mother and Matteo culminates in their returning to the spiritual home, that is their spiritual fulfillment.

The journey undertaken by three different characters at different planes of existence with an intention in search of the root of spirituality is highly symbolic. It is symbolic because while depicting the conflict-ridden existence of these characters, Anita Desai is dealing with the predicament of the modern man caught in the contrived dialectical opposition between 'what is' and 'what ought to be'. The disintegrated and fragmented beings, Matteo as well as Laila's endeavor all through has been to attain integration of being and wholeness of personality. Thus, in the novel Desai symbolically occupies with the individual's pursuit for freedom and Truth that provide spiritual sustenance to the split self.

Material Realization and Naming

Journey to Ithaca begins with two quotations – a poem *Ithaca* by C.P. Cavafy and a line by Milan Kundera – both of which are indicative of its thematic trust, while the title encapsulates the gist of the novel. These two quotations determine the character of the novel. Let us begin with Milan Kundera's line "- - - things exist in their essence even before they are materially realized and named" (Desai, 1995: IX). This is true with Matteo and the Mother, as the novel dramatizes the dilemma of these two characters who strive to find a higher meaning in a strange world.

What Milan Kundera says is absolutely true with Matteo, for Matteo, the only child of well-to-do Italian parents, exhibits signs of worldly failure from the beginning. Even as a boy he fails to conform to the domestic or social norms of the world around. The life at the school baffles him like, the geometry and algebra. He refuses to eat meat, gravy and pastries, his mother try to force on him.

After reading Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* and *Siddhartha*, all Matteo wants is to place a distance between his parents and himself. Further, he no longer sleeps in his bed but stretches himself on a worn rug on the floor, "Just like a tomcat who wants to escape from the house and go on the tiles" (28). His behaviour at school and home symbolically exhibits that the seeds for higher values of life had already been there (i.e. in Matteo's mind) in their essence "even before they were materially realized and named."

Things in Their Essence

Matteo's encounter with his tutor, Fabian, and his reading of Hesse's *Journey to the East* and *Siddhartha* instills in him a curiosity towards the Enlightenment of the East and towards the philosophy of Vedanta and he leaves his Italian home in search of spiritual enlightenment and ultimate truth in the ashrams of India. Here the role of Fabian is highly symbolic for Fabian pushes Matteo towards the "things" which had already been there "in their essence" in Matteo's mind.

A Spiritual Pilgrim

Matteo, a spiritual pilgrim, passes through many temptations and trials on his way for the attainment of enlightenment. In India he encounters many 'fake sages' in his pursuit of ultimate truth. Obsessed with Truth and spiritual quest, Matteo passes through a series of failures. He pursues his goal single-mindedly, facing trials and tribulations, hardships of an extreme kind, until he reaches it surely. The series of failures, trials and tribulations and hardships of an extreme kind suggest the spiritual state of the pain and agony through which the soul must pass for its purification before it attains illumination, which is followed by a spiritual bliss.

Matteo passes through the pain and agony and at last the illuminated Matteo realizes that the 'mystery' he has long been searching for is neither in bookish knowledge nor even in blind faith, but it is essentially "an experience of bliss" (105). Truth comes to him in the form of an experience of bliss. Matteo finds in the Mother his 'Guru' who shows him "the way into His Divine Presence" (105).

Matteo, who had once read in the *Katha Upanishad* about 'the path of joy and the path of pleasure', now determines to follow the path of joy as against the path of pleasure. All this symbolically reflects his quest for spirituality.

Firmness of Character – Cultivating a Sense of Surrender

True spirituality demands firmness of character – a capacity for suffering that serves to build up the seeker's spiritual stamina, thus enabling him to approach closer to his goal. This is what Desai seems to suggest in the novel as she makes Matteo first work as a letter-writer for the Mother then as a washer-man at sink and lastly as an in-charge of a new publication unit at the Mother's 'Abode of bliss'. Even he is asked to fetch a tumbler of warm milk from the kitchen for the Mother before she retires.

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All this is highly symbolic from the spiritual point of view. The Mother desires him to make a total surrender of his ego; that alone would make him worthy recipient of divine love. What Anita Desai suggests is that every step on the spiritual path has to be taken with utmost care and concentration and for that the soul has to cultivate a state of self-surrender and then only it can seek a highest joy or *Parmananda*.

His work for the Mother is nothing but his initiation into spiritual world. The spiritually transformed Matteo now rejects the Westernized view of his wife. For Sophie, “Work is work and should bear fruit” (125), but Matteo believes in, “a higher way of life [---] work without desiring the fruit from that work” (125). It is a spiritual gospel of *Gita*. Thus, it is the fateful encounter with the Mother that brings Matteo at last to self-understanding and spiritual enlightenment.

A Story of Redemption

In the novel the Mother symbolically emerges as an image of ‘Guru’, as it is she who brings about Matteo’s redemption. Through the story of the Mother and Matteo’s redemption Desai has just symbolically represented the Oriental philosophy, for the dynamic and inspiring teachings of *Upanishadic Vedanta*, *Bhagvat Gita* and Buddhism are of the view that faith in or surrender to an incarnation or a prophet will bring about one’s redemption.

At the early stage of his life in India, the absence of a proper ‘Guru’ leads Matteo astray. After running from one ashram to another in search of a ‘Guru’, Matteo reaches an ashram on the mountain in the North and at last experiences *Paramananda* (bliss) at the feet of the Mother, the head of the ashram. Thus, his journey ends in total surrender to the Mother with the conviction that she is the “one who can reveal the unknown” (141) to him.

Matteo is so obsessed with his pursuit that he simply does not care for or even remember his responsibility towards wife or children. This a very common attitude found among many Indian monks. In his pursuit of *jnana* (enlightenment), Matteo works for the Mother without desiring the fruit from that work. Thus, in Matteo one finds the three well-known ways of approach to Reality – *Karma*, *Bhakti* and *Jnana*. These ways of approach to reality are the essence of the *Gita*, which is characteristically a theistic Hindu scripture. Thus, Matteo symbolically re-enacts the spiritual adventure of ancients in his quest for truth.

The Lotus

Further, we have the symbol of ‘a lotus’. The symbol of ‘lotus’ is always found in the sacred Hindu, Buddhist and Christian literatures. The symbol of lotus suggests purity and perfection, for though it blooms in the mud, remains perfectly ‘undefiled’. Like the

'lotus' the spiritually awakened being remains detached with the filthy materialistic world. That's why the Mother advises Matteo "to be like a lotus flower, which is not wetted by water or stained by mud" (138). Thus, the Mother indicates to Matteo through her spiritual gospel of love, irrespective of any religion, caste and creed, the spiritual experience to which he is subjected.

Return to Nature

The belief in the possibility of man's attainment of 'highest bliss' or 'enlightenment' through a humble return to nature is very common in Indian literature. Anita Desai, too, believes in this possibility. So she employs the symbol of 'mountain' in her novel. The mountain symbolizes moral and spiritual superiority. The Mother attains the absolute peace and the 'miraculous spiritual power' at the mountain peak. Like Matteo, it is her strong conviction that there must be a Master somewhere to show her the Eternal Truth. In this sense Laila, too, symbolically re-enacts the spiritual adventure of ancients in her quest for truth.

The Fire

In the final pages of the novel the symbols such as fire, rain, river and mountain are employed by Desai. On her journey to the Himalayas, with the desire to be free of this world, to escape into a better and brighter one, Laila visualizes an 'Eternal light' setting her on fire. The 'fire' signifies the pain and penance the mortal must undergo to achieve 'deification'.

The symbol of 'fire' has a purgative value. The 'fire' purges the mind of the aspirant of unwanted emotions that alone makes him or her worthy recipient of the intimations of immortality. At the mountain the evening star appears in the heavens and shines out from the deep blue of infinity. Seeing it Laila begins to dance in ecstasy and her dance in prayer and joy brings the Master to her pronouncing her "Shakti", "Durga – Mother of us all", "The Divine Force", and "Sweet Goddess of the Mountain" (299). Here Laila's dance is symbolic.

Spiritual Ecstasy

Laila's dance becomes a medium to express her joy over perfect communion of soul into the supreme soul. Obviously, her lyrical utterance conveys the state of spiritual ecstasy Laila must have experienced at the glimpse of the eternal. Here ends the most turbulent phase of her search providing her bliss, wisdom, enlightenment and her great transformation from Laila to the Mother.

Thus, transformed, Laila could see the world itself, including all living and non-living things, radiant with beauty. She realizes the oneness of Man and God, of Mind and Nature. It is this transformation that makes her to smile at every old man, at dogs in the dust, and, “even the crows that morning seemed to sing and scream” (300).

Function of Physical Ailments

Desai has presented symbolically the physical ailments of Laila and Matteo. Laila and Matteo almost die when they fall seriously ill. Desai seems to suggest that through physical ailment comes liberty from bodily consciousness and confinement. In Bombay at the dance master’s dingy flat Laila falls terribly ill and is admitted in a hospital for treatment and cure of hepatitis. Matteo, too, was infected by the same disease. Matteo also becomes the holy man after recovery. It is from the hospital that Laila finds her way to her enlightenment. All this is of course very symbolic.

The Crow

Further the image of ‘crow’ is of crucial significance in the novel. It appears for several times in the novel. Sophie finds Hotel Monaco a threatening menace – “all the crows in Bombay seemed to have gathered to huddle [- - -] letting out caws of complaint at the season and their fate” (44).

During the monsoon season, the crows maddened her with their cries “giving extra loud caws of indignation and outrage” (45).

Earlier, when Laila comes over to India and is trapped in the cage-like flat in Bombay, under the threat of extinction and the spell of the fake Krishna, she too finds the cawing harsh and it maddens her: “Outside black crows are fighting and screaming. [- - -] They swoop upon it (a bucket of refuse) [- - -] They frighten me so” (285). This incident exhibits that the image of crow is used by Desai to indicate the turmoil and restlessness within the minds of Laila and Sophie.

Silencing of Crows

It is interesting to note here that these frightening crows are silenced once their ‘journey’ is complete. Thus, the image of ‘crow’, in the novel, signifies the discordant cawing within man. Once the enlightenment is attained, the crows can be silenced or even they appear ‘radiant with beauty’. The enlightened Laila, at last, smiles at every old man, at dogs in the dust, and, “even the crows that morning seemed to sing and scream” (300). Thus the image of crow dominates the pages of *Journey to Ithaca* and contributes to the development of the theme of spiritual quest in the novel.

Thus, the theme of the spiritual quest is depicted in the novel with the symbols of the crow, the peacock, the fake guru’s, the fake Krishna, the disease – hepatitis, the ashrams,

the holy sage, journey, the river, temple, the mountain peak, the evening star, the lantern, the storm and rain, engulfing waters, bathing in the river and the dance of ecstasy and lastly the master Krishna.

River and Rain

Further, Desai refers to river and rain as symbols those provide purity to mind. Before entering the 'Abode of bliss' i.e. the temple on mountain, Laila takes bath in the river and cries out in joy as she feels that she has taken the bath in the waters of divine love. The river flows and carries her past away and leaves her pure and joyous as the new-born, fit to meet the divine. In such spirits she finds the Master, the incarnation of the God of love and the mountain peak becomes her "true home" (300).

Laila receives her spiritual enlightenment at Prem-Krishna's (the Master) feet on 'a night tossed by torrential rains and storms'. This is highly symbolic. Unless the storms of life are conquered, sorrows flooded away, and purity gained, the entry into the serene enlightenment cannot occur. Desai significantly suggests this by the use of symbols of 'storm' and 'rain'. Laila enters the 'Abode' to become one with Prem-Krishna after conquering the tempests of life and gaining the purity of mind.

Vedantic Philosophy in *Journey to Ithaca*

In *Journey to Ithaca* Desai presents a very profound Vedantic philosophy of the unfathomable knowledge of Nature. For her God is present in every particle of Nature. While the Mother attains her spiritual enlightenment at the mountain, after the Mother's death, Matteo also selects a departure in the nature (mountain) for the absolute peace and attains identify in illumination and miraculous spiritual power. This is evident in the symbolic meeting between Matteo and his son Giacomo. To Giacomo his father looks like "the painting of Jesus in Church" (309). This is nothing but Matteo's salvation here in this world.

Matteo attains this 'miraculous spiritual power' after the death of his guru, the Mother. The Mother is but the 'spiritual leader' who guides her disciple towards truth and God. This is also symbolic. According to Hinduism the 'Guru' is the one, who shows the path of liberation (*Moksha*) to the disciple but *Moksha* is to be achieved by oneself by trial and error. Once the 'Guru' puts his disciple on the proper path, his work is over. This is what exactly happens in the case of Matteo and the Mother. After the death of the Mother it is the Nature that provides Matteo the spiritual enlightenment and he attains the *Moksha* here in this world.

Through the novel (*Journey to Ithaca*) Anita Desai tries to convey the ancient Indian doctrine of surrendering one's own ego to the elements of nature and becoming one with the cosmic elements i.e. the spirit of the god. Desai's perception of oriental philosophy, her preoccupations with religious India, her perceptions of the gospel of *Gita*, *Vedanta* and *Upanishadas* are presented in *Journey to Ithaca* symbolically.

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Desai seems to convey here that ‘bliss’ can be achieved by those who discard the physical attainments of the world, and enter into the cosmic world of the natural elements. The Mother experiences a ‘bliss’ when she is reunited with the cosmic elements. In *Journey to Ithaca* there is an experience of ultimate joy of life (bliss) preached by all the saints; prophets, philosophers and mystics of the world. In the novel Desai suggests that the meaning of God and the purpose of life rest ultimately in the mission of universal love.

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