

**Self-Effulgence as Adhyatmik Journey : A critique of Anita
Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*****Dr. Atul Prakash Budholia**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Dayanand Vedic College, Orai

Abstract

Anita Desai holds a unique and significant position in contemporary Indian English fiction. She is among the pioneering Indian English novelists who explore existential concerns through their fictional narratives. Her writing focuses on the inner world of her characters, examining their thoughts, emotions, and psychological experiences. Her novel *Journey to Ithaca* explores the evolution of the human psyche and the pursuit of spiritual growth. It also examines the encounter between Eastern and Western cultures, particularly in relation to moral, cultural, and social values. At the same time, the novel provides an in-depth understanding of human psychology and the complexities of human behaviour. Through these themes, Desai presents the struggles of individuals in their search for spiritual fulfilment, self-discovery, and a deeper understanding of life.

Keywords: Predicament, Ashram, Sadhaka, Nectar, Adhyatma, Bhava parivartan
(spiritual change)

Anita Desai as one of the celebrated writers of Indian English fiction, holds a unique place among the contemporary women novelists of Indian English literature. As a novelist, she designs the narratives of her novels in such a way as she succeeds in analysing the interior regions of human psyche. As a psychological novelist, she is skilled enough in unfolding the basic instincts, traumatic behaviour and the repressed

desires of characters. In her novels, she invariably reveals the predicament of human beings for their existential pursuitss.

Desai has seen the best of the east and the west from her childhood. She, therefore, underwent some formative influences on her from the western writers. such as Emile Bronte, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Proust. These writers left an indelible impression on her for designing the theory of her fictional writings. The following philosophers and existentialists such as Schopenhauer, Bergson, Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre also influenced her writings.

Unlike her other novels, *Journey to Ithaca* rotates around the three main characters : Matteo, his wife Sophie and the spiritual teacher Laila. The journey that is done by Matteo and his wife Sophie for having the Adhyatmik knowledge in the company of Indian Sadhus comes finally to its fruition. Matteo's wife Sophie, a journalist by profession has been trained since her childhood in the western ways of life. She is versed in worldly affairs and always remains ready to accept the things logically. Matteo on the other, follows incessantly the ways of devotion and desires to know the unknown of the life. Sometimes the culture of the west in Sophie clashes with the culture of the east in Matteo.

This novel presents the riches of psychology and the profound visionary approach that emerges from the psychic turmoil due to the overburdened motifs of luxurious life in the west. It presents before the readers a journey- not a physical journey but the journey that is to be mapped in the interior regions of human psyche. The characters as young european couple, Matteo (an Italian idealist) and Sophie (a young and pragmatic lady) come to India for seeking the real contentment through its spiritual ascension. This novel, *Journey to Ithaca* sets some new trends in Indian English fiction. Just as one finds

the journey image in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and in Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*. The metaphor of journey in this novel too brings into being the movement of the protagonist from temporality to spirituality. The journey which ends in tragedy in *Baumgartner's Bombay* comes to its fruition in *Journey to Ithaca*. On the level of construction and design, it follows the dramatic pattern with its devices of *Prologue* and *Epilogue*.

The inclusion of *Prologue* helps her disclose the inner human motives for higher values in life. In *Prologue*, the early life of Matteo, the hero of the novel, is made very clear to the readers. To a philosophic child like Matteo,, the school was like a "theorem set with in a larger theorem". So, this mathematical precision created in him a failure as a student at his early age. The readers through *Prologue* are informed that the school life "baffled him like the geometry and algebra" (18). Whenever, he was inquired of his activities in the school, his answers to questions appeared sullen and monosyllabic. In *Epilogue*, the readers are passed on knowledge of the journey of Matteo to India, his marriage with Sophie and the role of his parents in nurturing their children-Giacoma and Isabel after his departure from Italy to India. The anxiety of Matteo's parents brings forth two main aspects of Matteo's life: his withdrawal from the school and the appointment of Fabian as a teacher for his further studies. Fabian acquaints him with Hermann Hesse's *Journey to East*, which enkindles in him a curiosity towards the philosophy of Vedanta. Another remarkable incident lies in his marriage with Sophie who "was a journalist"(30). After this marriage, both Sophie and Matteo left for India.

Chapter first of this novel reveals Sophie and Matteo's departure from Italy to India, their apparent contradictions for the East-West encounters, their experiences of *Kumbh Mela* at Allahabad, their arrival at an ashram in Bihar and again their aversion towards the activities of the ashram. Both Sophie and Matteo had "a design, a pattern, to

their wanderings"(35). An analogical matrix in the psychic depth of Metteo becomes perceptible when he begins to learn Sanskrit here. Sophie, on the other hand, feels suffocated and always complains to Matteo against the unsavoury atmosphere of the ashram.

Chapter second brings into being yet another challenge to Metteo. Till now, Sophie is pregnant and she wishes to leave this place for another one on a mountain of the Himalayan regions for her safer delivery. On the advice of the doctor, both Sophie and Mateo come to an ashram at Himalayan region. This ashram is run by a beautiful young woman who is known as the Mother. But Sophie suspects the spiritual authority of the Mother: "It sounds as if she gets up on a stage and hypnotises you all like a magician" (102). Sophie with her womanly emotions becomes jealous of the Mother and regards her "a monster spider who had spun this web to catch these silly" (127). The jealousy of a woman makes her enquire all about the past of the Mother. Her inquisitiveness leads her to discover her arrival in India as a dancer, "looking for a rich somebody to pick up (131). Like Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, Sophie becomes rebellious against the forced decision of her husband. With her future anxieties of a mother, she leaves the company of her husband and comes back to Italy to her parents. In Italy, she tries to fill the absence of Metteo in the company of another gentleman, Paolo whom she meets in a party. He also finds this mature woman quite fascinating. But Sophie still experiences the over powering effect of the Metteo-consciousness on her. "Her life with Metteo had spoilt her life with a man like Paolo: it was no longer possible" (155). Anita Desai thus upholds sanctity of her relations between husband and wife. Chapter third gives a new turn to the story, as it reveals Sophie's ceaseless efforts for discovering the past of Laila. She inquires of her from the doctor

and finds the secrets how she became the mother from Laila, the dancer. A daughter of Alma and Hameed, Laila rebels against the traditional code of Muslim religion and leaves her home in search of her spiritual existence. Like Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, she is a rebel against her social norms and craves for her self identity.

At the Al Azhar University, her yearning for freedom is perceptible when she addresses her fellow students "better to go to prison than like as slaves"(172). Laila as a revolutionary student becomes a source of affliction to Alma and Hameed. Even at her seventeen, she determines to break off the traditional custom which snares her like the coil of a serpent. Her stay at Paris upsets her aunt Francoise and uncle Bertrand by her rebellious thoughts. When her uncle asks her to eat meat, she refuses it and confesses: "I am a vegetarian. No one will make me eat the flesh of slaughtered animals" (185). In Paris, instead purchasing Islamic books, she purchases the books of the Oriental philosophy. Above all, as luck would have it, she meets a troupe of Krishna lila and joins this troupe for learning the Oriental art of dance. Now, she learns the classical art of dance from Krishnaji, but the art of dance does not bind her for a long time and she gives it up for realizing the higher vision of God. Chapter fourth describes 'Sophie's arrival in Bombay to Krishnaji's house in order to know the past life of Laila. Sophie recognizes Krishnaji because she has seen him as a young dancer in Paris, Venice and Laussane. As he listens to the name of Laila, he revives his past life and confesses his relations with her as a "father" and as a "teacher". The dairy episode in this chapter becomes the real source of Laila's Journey to the East and her meeting with Swami Pramanand ji.

There are three characters who strive in search of the higher vision of human life. Apparently, Matteo has shown some seeds of Adhyatma in his early life. He questions his teacher Fabian as a boy about an esoteric experience. He thinks over the relationships

between the body and the spirit thus: "It seemed that in time, all substance from one image could flow in to the other and only one would remain: Leo He must grow, I must disappear" (24). The growth of "He" becomes suggestive of his divine attributes and the disappearance of "I" symbolizes the extinction of his egoism. Metteo as a seeker after truth thinks of unveiling the mystery of life and death. Both husband and wife thus arrive at Bombay in an ashram. But Sophie lacks the faith of Metteo and as a young wife, she always remains in search of her existence as a woman with her husband. The novelist propounds the domestic and social vision through Sophie and Matteo - the psychological realism of a young couple. After the pregnancy of Sophie, their arrival in an ashram in Himalayan region brings some new reflections into being. This ashram represents the true interest of the devotee irrespective of his caste and creed. Working on a universal norms of life, Desai follows the secular image of India by making Laila confess about the presence of God in the heart of man. Laila as Mother also refuses to accept any kind of formalism for the realization of ultimate truth. The Mother as a Muslim girl does not hold back to be initiated by a Hindu saint. She remarks about the futility of all religions thus:

This is no church, my friend, this is no temple or mosque or Vihara. We have no religion. Religion? Like the black crows up in the tree caw-caw-caw, scolding, scolding! But, do they crow at us now? No, they are silent! We have silenced them ... Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, makes one fearful. The master has told not to feel guilty not to feel ashamed, not to be afraid. (P.98)

The image of "the black crow" in the above passage brings forth the hollowness and emptiness of all religions. The sound of the crow "caw, caw, caw" is linked with

meaningless sound of different religions which have nothing to do with the absolute reality. When there comes a protest against Laila's Muslim identity in the ashram, the Master shifts this ashram place in the Himalayan region. He gives an example of Kabir who was himself a Muslim, but led his entire life "in the holy city of Banaras and he wrote songs of Rama" (134). Matteo as such comes to the right place, now, for his regeneration as a *sadhaka*.

The story of revolt against Laila, later as the mother of the Ashram, reminds the story of Sabri, The devotee of Rama in the ashram of Rishi Matang. Sabri as a tribal woman comes to the Ashram of Rishi Matang in order to have the knowledge from him who himself runs the Ashram near Mount *Rishyamukha* and Lake *Pampa*. Out of the area of the Ashram she begins quietly to serve the sages at night by clearing thorns and pebbles. The disciples residing in the Ashram discover finally the person who used to cleanse outside of the ashram and that person was none else but Sabri herself. The disciples of the ashram revolted against her for the two main reasons : that she was a tribal by caste and that she was a woman staying near Ashram. Rishi Matang hardly cared about the opposition of the disciples and accepted her as a true disciple and blessed her with spiritual wisdom. The story of Sabri occurs in the *Ramayana* by Valmiki and *Ram Charitmanas* by Goswami Tulsidas.

The Mother thus exemplifies an ideal life of high attributes while teaching to her disciples: "You must know 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" (118).

The "nectar" here symbolizes the essence of life. Matteo works on the advice of Mother as *sadhaka* with all patience. The western ideology for work is analyzed ("work

is work and should bear fruits" 125) with reference to Indian hypothesis of "niskama karma". Here is Matteo who confesses the higher and nobler vision of "niskama karma" in the teachings of the Mother before his wife, Sophie: "She teaches us to work without desiring the fruit from that work. Isn't that a higher way of life" (125). In this ashram, love is regarded as the nucleus for God realization. Matteo acknowledges his sacred love towards the Mother:

Matteo: Sophie, my love for her isn't the love one feels for a beautiful or glamorous or intriguing woman, a legend, as you say. You must see that! There is a difference between sacred and profane love, Listen, in her presence I feel I am more alive than I am in the presence of any other living creature.... When I leave her, I feel I am falling. down, down in to darkness. No, not darkness but grayness, flatness, emptiness. (141)

The constant jealousy of a woman in Sophie makes her depart from India to Italy; but the Matteo-consciousness so overpowers her as she arrives in India again. She discovers now the past life of Laila as student, as a rebel in the Al Azhar University, as a dancer and as seeker of a spiritual Guru in Swami Permanand ji. Evidently. the deeper plan of the novelist is to envisage the varied groups of human relationships for a common pursuit of *Adhyatma*. As a novelist, Desai does not spare even a character like Laila for the instinctual and impulsive flights of human mind. Here is an example for two apparent contradictions in Laila's mind: psychic aberrations and a self-confidence to overcome them:

Faces leered at me, smiling / Are we not fine enough for you?/ From somewhere strength came to me / And I repelled them, / Knowing it better to die/Fighting Evil/Than to live without His Grace (P.301)

Sophie is thus satisfied with her inquiry about the Mother and comes back to the ashram. She is stunned to see the ashram deserted by the spiritual journey of the Mother. Sophie perceives the higher position of the Metteo as a seeker after truth in the guidance of the mother: "The urgency to see Metteo, to tell and reveal, had to overtake her, she had not thought that for Metteo too, the wheel had turned"(303). The "Wheel" images gives the metamorphosis of Metteo as a regenerated man. Sophie thinks and burns with the fire of spiritual thoughts. She finally determines to follow the ideas of Metteo as a seeker. When she says to Diya "I'll have to," and adds "what else". (305)

She now intends for completing an inner journey of consciousness like Metteo for esoteric experiences. Thus, Desai through her visionary perspectives achieves a great success in this novel by outlining the higher values of human love, humanism, realism, mysticism and a unified code for the universal vision of brotherhood.

As a novelist Desai succeeds in revealing the subtle and intense expositions of human psyche first in *Clear Light of Day*, in *Custody* and then in *Baumgartner's Bombay*. *Baumgartner's Bombay* brings in to being the emotional states of a European Jew who explores the basic question of identity as an Indian citizen. This novel prepares the foreground for *Journey to Ithaca* by revealing a super-sensitive mental state of the protagonist. The central issue in *Journey to Ithaca* is not the search for identity or existence, but a "search for truth, ultimate reality, beauty, joy, ecstasy or whatever form truth has".

The three characters. Laila, Sophie and Matteo come to India as the seekers after truth. As the young wife with the western-oriented approach to life, Sophie desires to fulfill the dream of her womanhood but this is not possible in an unruly and stuffy arranged life of the ashram. She feels neglected among the other pilgrims in the ashram:

"She scrambled to her feet and returned to eat some bread from the night before and drink a tumbler of tea given her. and even smoked a cigarette furtively behind a hut feeling both guilty and grateful to be excluded" (535).

The smoking of cigarette "furtively" becomes symbolic of two things: first she breaks the code of the ashram; and secondly, she relieves herself momentarily from her tense nervous system due to an inferiority complex as an ashramite. Again, the smoking of Sophie brings forth the contradictions of her mind: the guilt and gratefulness. She feels guilty, for she smokes furtively as an ashramite and feels grateful as she does not like to develop any association and reconciliation with any of the pilgrims in the ashram. As an expatriate, she experiences the dilemma of her identity. The sense of belongingness so vexes and overpowers her that she questions her husband: "Couldn't we stay in our own country? To die there?" (57) Disenchanted as an ashramite, even the very mention of the word "ashram" baffles her so much so that she longs for her home. Weeping like a child she cries, "I want to go home"(89).

Metteo is yet another important character who aspires to accomplish his higher existence of life. As a devotee, he finds solace when he is blessed by the presence of divine Mother. During his illness in an ashram of Bihar, the doctor attending to him suggests that "Metteo doesn't need a doctor, he needs a *guru*" (147). Metteo and Sophie have a basic difference in their respective approach to life: Metteo represents all that comes from heart, while Sophie represents all that comes from the mind. He acknowledges the grace and blessings of the Mother thus: "Her presence heightens and illuminates the experience of living as no one else's doesWhen she appears, everything comes to life, it flowers, it brightens" (110). Thus the Mother as container and repository of all power and energy creates a spiritual awareness in Metteo.

The third character who becomes rebellious like other heroines of Anita Desai for the spiritual quest is Laila. Spending her childhood in Alexandria, she is educated in Paris and Venice and finally comes to India for her spiritual emancipation. Laila as a Muslim girl revolts against her parents religion, endures the panics of life in her search for godhead, first in Paris and then in India. As a dancer, she fails, but as a seeker after truth, she succeeds in fulfilling the final goal of her life. There are two women who revolt in this novel against their surroundings: Sophie and Laila. Sophie longs wordly freedom while Laila aspires for spiritual freedom. As a rebellious daughter of Alma and Hameed, she exhibits "an amber of curiosity". Since her early childhood, her curious nature makes her to give up "all orthodox religions" (110).

As the novelist analyses the psychic depth of the characters, her language tends to be situational and contextual. For example, the conversation between Sophie and Metteo becomes a good piece of symbolic and psychological language, Metteo as a seeker after truth finds two kinds of paths while reading the story of *Katha Upnishad*: the path of Joy and path of pleasure. The linguistic meaning of these two words for Sophie is more or less the same. She seems awe-stricken when Metteo distinguishes the linguistic properties of these two words:

Sophie's lips felt dry, and she spoke through those dry lips hoarsely, "I can't understand what you mean. The path of pleasure, the path of joy. To me, they are the same, they are not the separate. But I see that you are saying I am the fool, the one who takes the path of pleasure and that you are the wise one, (295)

Sophie expresses her contempt towards other people in the ashram through non-verbal language. She does not like to give up European identity among the ashramites in

India. So, she does not try to understand the mystical yet the false language of the people at the ashram. She excludes herself from the environment of the ashram due to the "lack of the language" (34). She rather tries to understand the language of birds and animals through their gestures and motions but ignores willingly to understand the language of people at the ashram. Here is an example by which Sophie comprehends at the ashram. Here is an example by which Sophie comprehends the language of animals through sound :

The pal dogs that barked in the village and in other villages and in other villages, plaintively or aggressively, pleasingly or even conversationally as though addressing each other over great distance in the dark, were more comprehensible to her: she listened to their dialogues with greater understanding and sympathy. Once, she was certain she heard a pack of jackals howling, as eerily as wolves and this roused the dogs to frenzy : she felt their fear in her own veins (53).

The phrases "jackals howling" as "eerily as wolves" as the "dogs to frenzy" are indicative of Sophie's turmoil in her mind. The fear of her conscious mind creates the fear in her unconscious mind. The animal image haunts her like a psychosis patient. She thus becomes nightmarish and sees her new-born babe as a snake.

Sometimes, Anita Desai like a linguist distinguishes between native and non-native variety of English. Sophie as an ashramite does not understand the regional pronunciation of English. Even Matteo hears a woman, speaking the typical regional variety of English:

She was speaking very slowly and clearly. enunciating each word very precisely Almost as if it were lesson in elocution but it took Matteo

sometime to make out that she spoke in English. for her voice and accent sounded so Indian in its pronunciation of "ds" and "ts" rolled "rs" and heavy emphasis on the syllable. (74)

The different images used in this novel make the language of the writer symbolic and suggestive. The image like "the graveled path", "dust--filmed glass", "a valvet tassel", "a cream - flicked smile" prepare the foreground for narrative pattern. Again, Sophie uses the image of "a monster spider" for the Mother and for her spinning web to catch "these silly flies". The images like "breast like a sword" and "an invisible crevice" are functional, for they reveal the hidden and interior regions which are beyond the purview of any written language.

Anita Desai, in *Journey to Ithaca*, brings together people from different parts of the world to present a universal vision of human life. The novel goes beyond the barriers of caste and religious beliefs. Hugo's spiritual journey, which remains incomplete in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, reaches its fulfilment in *Journey to Ithaca*. Laila, the central character of the novel, challenges social conventions and rises above the narrow boundaries of caste, creed and particular religious beliefs in search of a higher understanding of human life. Through this novel, Desai emphasises the universal truth that all religions ultimately lead to a common path, representing the religion of humanity. She also raises an important question: how can *bhavya parivartan* (spiritual transformation) be brought about in human beings? The novel concludes with the hope that humanity can renew and improve itself through self-analysis and introspection.

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