CHAPTER XI

JOURNEY TO ITHACA
- Quest for Indian Mysticism & Spirituality
*Journey to Ithaca* is entirely different from that of other novels of Anita Desai. The main theme of the novel brings the reader back to 1970s when foreigners and foreign tourists were very much fascinated by Indian Mysticism and Spirituality. Indian saints, sadhus, gurus and their ashrams attracted many foreigners and particularly the Americans and Europeans. Americans started Hare Krishna missions in India. Foreigners came to India with the hope of getting spiritual enlightenment. The ideas that are expressed in this entrancing novel such as the West’s fascination for India, its quest for spiritual enlightenment and its pursuit of god-men, gurus and mystics are not exactly new. All these ideas were already expressed in a large number of novels both at home and abroad. Desai’s message in this novel, particularly to foreigners and generally to Indians appears to set out on the novel’s title page in Cavafy’s best known poem which tells them not to expect ‘that Ithaca will offer you riches. Ithaca has given you a beautiful voyage. Without her you would never have taken the road. But she has nothing to give you now’.

The aim of the novelist is to say that India has lost its past glory, mysticism and spirituality. So whosoever wished to see the glory of India and hoped to have Indian spirituality and mysticism were totally or partly disappointed. Disappointment and despair make people frustrated and frustration ultimately leads them to alienation. As observed by Swain and Nayak, "Alienation in this novel is different from earlier novels of Desai. The alienation here is neither of neurotic and hypersensitive individuals nor of aspiring artists nor of self-sacrificing and self-effacing ladies." It clearly depicts the alienation of Matteo and Laila and their thirst for spirituality and Sophie’s involvement
in marital life and her cultural and social alienation. "Loneliness and withdrawal that was 
gently examined in Fire on the Mountain, the effect of displacement on identity and 
normality that was explored in Bye, Bye, Blackbird and the dilemma’s and insecurities 
of living in an alien environment that was evoked in Baumgartner’s Bombay - are all 
there in the novel," as pointed out by Mukunda Padmanabhan.

Alienation in this novel is socio-psychic and cultural and worldly in nature. The 
three major characters - Matteo, Laila and Sophie are all alienated characters. There are 
traces of self-alienation both in Matteo and Laila from the very beginning of their 
childhood. They are born to it. They always loved loneliness. This self-alienation in 
them in course of time flowered into world-alienation. Sophie’s alienation is 
interpersonal and socio-cultural in nature. She is alienated from her husband, Indian 
society and its culture and tradition. Just like other novels of Desai it is also a 
psychological novel. The novelist is too much concerned with the interior landscape of 
her characters. The emotions, sensations moments of feelings of her characters are well 
depicted. In recent times she appears to be consciously attempting to map this ‘interior’ 
against a backdrop of history. It is a trend reflected in her later novels. It is most 
apparent in her latest and perhaps most ambitious novel, Baumgartner’s Bombay. 
Journey to Ithaca appears to be a continuation of this trend.

"Journey to Ithaca is not so much an odyssey as a quest for an ‘Eastern Holy 
Grail." It is a moving account mainly of Matteo’s nagging sense of alienation and his 
quest for spirituality. It also explores the ambiguous nature of divine and profane love. 
Desai sets the prologue in a garden by Lake Como, where Matteo’s young English tutor 
is introducing him to Eastern mysticism. A few years later Matteo marries a German girl
called Sophie. Like so many Western youths in the sixties and seventies the young Italian, Matteo leaves his luxurious home and affluent family for India along with his wife, Sophie in search of something more beyond his mundane existence. He hopes to find it in spiritual enlightenment in the ashrams of India. As he has been obsessed with India and her spirituality and mysticism, he comes to India with his wife back packing from one grotty lodging to another and finally an austere and unfriendly ashram in a slum to a benign and beautiful one in the Himalayan foot hills. Thus Matteo falls under the spell of the Holy Mother, an engaging old woman of an unknown origin, ‘wise’, ‘formidable’, ‘practical’, ‘high-spirited’ and ‘possessed‘ of a mysterious spiritual attraction – ‘an Eastern Saint Teresa’.

Matteo’s story begins with his education in Milan in his uncle’s house. He is a failure at school and foot-ball in Milan. He ‘could not stand the school from the first day to the last... they could not make him do his lessons or sing or play foot-ball’. He can understand nothing. So failure follows him all along. He had always played by himself and tried to keep clear of others. He ran alone down the corridors and around the playing fields. On Sundays he ran out for hours into the country. Even when he comes home for holidays, he will slip out of his mother’s arms. Hugo, in Baumgartner’s Bombay cut off from outside world, is immensely attached to his mother but Matteo is not attached to either of his parents. He is always very anxious to run lonely. Sometimes he stares at his parents and feels they repel him equally. It seemed painful that they should be related. He looks away sulking and tells them nothing about the school or his uncle’s household. He does not like to have any contact and communication with others.
He has been an alienated child. The seeds of alienation, it seems, are sown in his childhood itself or he is born to it. Detachment and alienation are inherent in his behaviour from the very beginning.

As there is no much progress at school in Milan at his uncle’s house, Matteo is brought back home. He is put under the care of Fabian, an English tutor who took care of his education at home. With Fabian, Matteo’s life becomes worth living. Interaction with him and a new-found feeling of belongingness provide strength and vigour to his thoughts and feelings. Fabian, in fact, turns out to be his friend, philosopher and guide. He enters Matteo’s life ‘like a comet brightening his mind and leading him on to the celestial way to freedom at a very tender age’. Matteo is sick of his parents’ involvement in his present and future. Even at home whenever he is free from his tutor, he wanders along the trees nearby and pretend to read whenever he is observed. His tutor every now and then reads out some pages from Hermann Hesse’s, Journey to the East and Siddhartha, copies of which he presents to his pupil later. These books influenced Matteo very much.

Matteo’s parents always want him to be very close to them. But his very nature is to run away from them. ‘They could not stop him - he could not stay in the house ... He could climb the walls or even the gate if they locked it, and run ... as if all he wanted was to place a distance between them and himself...’ (p.27). He goes away for the lonely ferry rides even. Like a perennial outsider he is always lonely and ill at ease in the world in which he lives.
Matteo is a born alien. He always wants to be away from people. He loves loneliness. He is a lone-walker and wandered just like Raka of Fire on the Mountain. As a boy he always plays by himself. He is a portrait of loneliness and alienation. He learns an attitude of quiet resignation and non-acceptance in childhood alone. Being an introvert by nature, he is neither free with anyone nor does he share his feelings with others. He wanders lonely among the things and places of devastation. His attempts to keep clear of others reveal his desire to escape from real life and his disgust with his immediate human contact. Like Arun Joshi's Som Bhaskar in The Last Labyrinth, Matteo is always in a hurry like a hare chased by unseen hounds. 'by the lake, round the corner ... or in the other direction ... through the lanes ... onto the wide grassy swath ... swinging uphill and out of sight ... he flung himself in his knees in the damp leaves or clung tree trunks. beating his head fiercely against them and crying, 'Dove sei? Dove sei? Where are you?' (p.27). It seems as if he were seriously and sincerely searching with unfailing efforts for a person, who had been very closely related to him, whom he missed long back, with a grief stricken heart in the places of destruction. The places he always likes to wander symbolise alienation.

Matteo is a born saint. Saintly qualities sprout in him from the very beginning of his childhood. He would not eat meat, gravy and pastries. He always wants bread and water alone. He does not like riches and comforts. He cares little for food clothing and shelter. 'He no longer slept in his bed but stretched himself on a worm rug on the floor. Just like a tomcat who wants to escape from the house ...' (p.28). It is almost a renunciation. As he grows up, his contact with the household decreased still further.
He always looked 'with the eyes of a man who is planning a long voyage'. His self-alienation has gradually turned into world alienation. He wants to be away from people and the society in which he lives. Each suggestion from his parents creates a barbed wire between the child and his parents. Locks and barriers became insignificant when he takes a flight from the filial bondages. 'He would run and run as if all he wanted was to place a distance between them and himself, a distance he drew out to greater lengths with each run' (p.27).

As Matteo crosses the border lines of boyhood and adolescence and steps into youth, he 'appeared calm, gentle, detached - no longer defiant and no longer impelled to fight' (p.28). There is a sort of change in him. Feeling that he will not listen to them, his parents arrange for him to take lessons in Latin and history from an old Father and to study mathematics and logic with the crippled sister of the village school. They fill the gaps in his education by making a patch work. His father feels happy about his son's deceptive sincerity and progress in his studies and thinks that he will settle either in banking business in Turin or the silk business in Como with his uncle, Falippo.

When a German banker comes to visit Bellagio with his wife and daughter, Matteo's parents invite them for lunch so that they can seek some piece of advice from the banker and the banking business. Matteo transfixes his eyes on Sophie, the daughter of the banker who is said to be a journalist. He takes her away to the uphill soon after lunch and disappears behind the stone of the ruined folly of the top of the hill. In the summer of 1975 Sophie and Matteo got married and left for India on foot. It is very strange on the part of Matteo who is alienated possessing the qualities of a saint to
merry Sophie. a total stranger and alien to him. It is love at first sight and at the same
time sudden and successful.

Matteo's interest in Indian religion becomes the sole object of his consciousness.
For him, religion is what Oswald Spengler says "the first and last metaphysics, the other
worldliness and a life with the supersensible." Being fascinated by Eastern mysticism
he comes to India with his wife, Sophie. She is least interested in the saints and their
ashrams as she has no belief in mysticism and spirituality. She wishes to see India and
its tourist centres. She is a foreign tourist whereas her husband is a foreign pilgrim to
India. She is unable to adjust to his way of life and thinking because he rates the world
of Gurus as more real and true than the world of Sophie or his parents. Sri Aurobindo
observes that in the state of "Supernatural Manifestation, individuals have developed,
what he calls the mind of light, which is the last of series of descending planes of
consciousness in which the super mind or modification of its manifests in activities."7
Their temperamental incomparability begins as "Matteo wishes to go in search of saints
and ashrams, ignoring the desires of his wife. Much against her will and pleasure she
follows her husband wherever he leads her'. But she fails to follow Indian social,
cultural and traditional habits. She is laughed at and commented upon by Indian pilgrims
at the ashram. Matteo follows them very scrupulously with devotion and sanctity.

Sophie separates herself from the Indian pilgrims and even from her husband.
She prefers loneliness. She feels alienated socially and culturally. According to Hajda
alienation is the awareness of, "non-belonging or non-sharing (which) reflects (one's)
exclusion of self exclusion from social and cultural participation."8 Matteo moves from
ashram to ashram visiting the saints and sadhus in search of Indian mysticism and
spiritual enlightenment. He thinks by relating, himself to the visions and insights of great sages he can have the first hand knowledge of the ultimate truth. No doubt he finds an abysmal barrier between himself and the mundane world. He is unable to relate to the space around him. In existential context, space does not mean the physical area but, "the human environment and every other that provides the setting in which the human life is to be lived." Sophie always desires to be with her husband alone. She craves for his constant company. So she tells her husband, "I want to go away. I want us to be by ourselves". She desires to visit the best tourist centres like Goa and Kashmir and hates the ashrams. Matteo wishes to search for the India of his imagination and thought. So he tells his wife that they did not come to see such India as she desires, ‘We shall never come to India to be by ourselves’ (p.47).

As time passes on, both Sophie and Matteo become poles apart. Desai’s treatment of husband-wife relationship is same in this novel as it is in her other earlier novels. It "is artistically moving and psychologically sound. Each one of the frustrated characters adopts his or her own manner of facing the problem of alienation, suffering, borden ..." Temperamental incompatibility has begun to creep into the life of Sophie and Matteo. Their aims are different. Matteo simply ignores his wife in finding his path to spiritual enlightenment. Sophie is very much frustrated and disgusted with the attitude of her husband. He is almost obsessed with the idea of spiritual enlightenment. However she is still quite hopeful that her husband will take her to the places of her choice one day. When they are on their way to a shrine where a saint obtained enlightenment, she is very much moved by the death of a child and the fate of its mother on the way. The death of the child on the way to the shrine shatters her belief in the ashrams and saints. She
fails to understand the purpose of their journey. When she asks her husband about it he replies very calmly that the purpose is to find India, to understand India and the mystery that is at the heart of India. He further tells her 'it is spiritual experience for which you must search in India, nothing else' (p.36). For him the meaning of spirituality is believing what he sees. His escape or denial of reality shatters the mind of Sophie. Matteo believes that the sages in the ashrams will guide him to attain spiritual enlightenment.

Losing the little hope she has in saints and their ashrams after the death of the pilgrim child, Sophie wants to lead a different life with the other foreign tourists. The last memory of Sophie about India is the dead child and the helpless mother. From that time onwards, as M. Padmanabham has said "the pilgrimage through India became suffused with the rich and aromatic haze of marijuana; it clung to her and became her clothing. It penetrated her and became her being while Matteo struggles to find the path to joy and self-discovery in gurus and ashrams. Sophie, who is disturbed by the effect of journey on Matteo and the growing distance between them - is increasingly aghast by India, its heat, sights, sounds and smells and most of all its confusing metaphysics and its apparent irrationality." When they came to Goa the growing distance between them grew still further and greater. They were almost separated both mentally and physically. Matteo slowly recedes and finally vanishes. Sophie merges with the other foreign tourists totally forgetting her husband under the influence of drink, drugs and smoke. She enjoys herself in the company of 'fun loving flower children of Goa'. As Sarokin observes: "The experience of these characters lead to the destruction of the net-
work of socio-cultural relationships, resulting in the demoralization of the individual or an increase in his psycho-social isolation."

The foreign tourists milled around ashrams of sadhus and yogis and had no idea of mixing with the general public of Indian society. They are alienated from Indian society. Their social and cultural alienation ultimately lead them to a world alienation. They made a separate world of their own in Indian society. They were not very much interested in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo or the Bhagwad Gita. They had forgotten the very aim of their tour to India. Every now and then they began to quarrel among themselves. There was no racial harmony among themselves. Their rivalry makes Sophie realise the importance of the company of her husband and sanctity of the marriage. Soon she rejoins her husband. The unexpected arrival of Sophie disappoints Matteo. He feels it an intervention. When Sophie was away, he could visit a number of ashrams and swamis with different mysterious powers for the attainment of spiritual enlightenment. Solanki observes that his "strategy of projection, his tendency to blame Sophie does not help him in coping with the stress and conflict that overwhelms from all sides. He knows that he has no strength to stand on his feet. His need of a Guru makes him lose his mental strength and confidence to face the world." He adopts a restricted way of living. He visits the saints in their ashrams without any faith of his own. As he is told that one can have faith through deep meditation, he withdraws from his wife giving away his room to her and spends the nights on the beach in a boat lonely. He wandered away to be alone and to be further away from everyone. Thus he is totally alienated from the society and from his wife.
Matteo gets lost in the mazes of blind faith. He thinks that spirituality is something very easy to achieve. He feels himself close to the supreme power. His ignorance remains a bliss to him. Outwardly, he tries to do what sadhus do on the banks of the rivers. He is startled to see a sadhu swimming across a river when it is in full spate. He does not realise that one can attain it only through a proper course of spiritual discipline or regular practice. He has faith but fails to attain wisdom and contentment inspite of his best efforts to understand the path of spiritual glory. It is very difficult for anyone to have an encounter with the higher reality without proper training and knowledge. He had travelled and searched for them with others. But he neither had seen nor experienced what the others did. As Mrinalini Solanki says "His conflict persists and the sense of integration seems to be nowhere near him. He is in the grip of disintegration within and without." He fails to achieve the spirit that characterise liberty and freedom, the sense of exhilaration, that release of energy. One needs faith and meditation to have a vision of spiritual truth and a lot of practice, discipline and self-sacrifice to have a whole hearted devotion and concentration. Matteo's lack of self-confidence and faith in others makes him withdraw from the outer world and even from his wife. He felt disabled without skills the others possessed, a kind of leper amongst them. His search for eternal truth makes him vulnerable. As Horney says, his, "real self became inactive." His creative, directive and discretionary powers are gone into oblivion. His futile ventures affect his health. Sophie feels pity and dismayed at his condition. His ridiculous predicament reminds her of 'an insect that had become disorientated and lost its bearings' (p.70). Yet she is helpless in convincing her husband. J.G. Benett believes: "what makes you panic is the inability to accept our own
nothingness. It looks as if there is a darkness ahead of us and we are frightened of going into that darkness." His quest becomes the quest for survival. His life becomes a meaningless and worthless one without having a vision of spiritual truth and it became impossible to return to the room and to the company of anyone.

In search of spiritual enlightenment Matteo embarks upon another journey. While wandering one day he saw in a cleft in a banyan tree, a circle containing a number of circles without either beginning or ending. They were infinite. He felt, 'that circle was the universe itself containing world within world'. A temple on the way turns out to be an abode for a stone. The sight of an old man worshipping a stone makes him feel all the more confused and lost. The stone begins to glow in Matteo's eyes. Then 'he felt, certain, divine light'. From that time onwards he begins to consider everything in the world divine. He begins to feel that divine manifests itself in everything and everybody'. In a bid to unravel the mystery of this labyrinth, he moves from ashram to ashram and from one yogi to another. But peace of mind and inner happiness elude him.

On their way to another ashram Matteo sees the title of the book "The Mother" in the railway book stall and picks it up. The photograph of the mother becomes an epitome of eternal bliss to him. Disgusted thoroughly, Sophie wants to hand over Matteo to the guru of the ashram. But she is much disappointed at seeing the ashram. She wants to be away from the ashram. She is treated like a strange creature everywhere. She feels alienated both socially and culturally everywhere sometimes out of humiliation. Life in a foreign country becomes unbearable to her and hence she wants to leave India. She fails to convince Matteo to follow her to their motherland who wishes to 'stay and
study in India. The gulf between them becomes still wider. Inspite of their temperamental incompatibility, in course of time Sophie gets pregnant. Finally they go to the Mother’s ashram at the foot hills of the Himalayas. For the first time since his departure from Italy Matteo experiences a sense of unity between the mundane and divine at the Mother’s ashram. He feels that life at the ashram is ‘only as an experience of unity, the unity of the spiritual with the physical, the dark with the light, the human with the natural’ (p.99). He feels further enlightened to hear the Mother speak about the divine Light. The Divine force is everywhere and the knowledge means the realisation of this truth. Everyone at the ashram is very happy and convinced of the spiritual speech of the Mother except Sophie. The Mother is a ‘hypnotist’ or a ‘magician’ to her. Her comments about the Mother hurt Matteo emotionally. He insults himself to such an extent that he fails to achieve a close affectionate relationship again with Sophie. He clarifies to her saying “I have given myself to her, why do you want to keep, Sophie, from pursuing my beliefs” (p.100). He comes alive in the presence of the Mother. He works at the ashram very ardentely ... thinking that she would now disclose her plans to him, the plans where he would at last transform himself leaving behind the old, sick, unhappy self, the self he despised and desired to get rid of and assume the new one made holy by her” (p.117). The Mother takes Matteo as her Secretary, focussing a special attention on him.

Matteo is deeply absorbed in the work of the press and publication of the Master’s work that there is little time or no time left for the family life. Sophie feels frustrated for his long absence and feels lonely and alienated. Their “small house sank into a silent well of her disappointment ... Matteo had vanished into the heart of a world that
remained shut to her” (p.126) ... Matteo finds the image of the mother a reason for living "any time spent away from the Mother was wasted time, empty time, dead time ... in the Mother’s company he and everything else came alive" (p.108). Being ignorant of real suffering and real joys he oscillates between a false kind of happiness and unhappiness. When Matteo becomes a father he asks the mother whether he can continue his life as sadhu in the ashram. Then the Mother replies him with a smile.” You are not absorbed in family life. “You are like the lotus ... your roots may be in the mud, but your petals are pure. The water does not touch them and the mud does not stain them. Be always like that lotus flower ... clean and pure" (p.138). Matteo’s escape into the Mother’s Ashram becomes a pretext to renounce his worldly duties as a husband and father. Spiritual life does not mean renunciation of worldly duties. Matteo is totally overpowered by what the Mother speaks or suggests. Sophie has grown tired of the Ashram and the life in the Ashram.

Now Sophie does not have any marital bliss and domestic harmony. Her married life has become a mirage. She feels alienated from her husband, Indian society and culture, especially from the ashram society. Rajiv Sharma points out that "...social-alienation is the decay of creative meaningful relations between man and man and it is the separation of man living in the society from the culture of his society, its principles and values." Being alienated socially and very much bored with the life at the ashram, Sophie reminds her husband that it is time for them to leave India as their boy Giacomo has grown for school! But Matteo is not in a mood to hear his wife and leave India. He is very much obsessed with idea of spiritual enlightenment. He believes that he will attain it one day. He is under the impression that the Mother in course of
time can reveal to him the ‘unknown’. Sophie questions him, ‘why is the ordinary not enough for you? Home, family, a child’. Their temperamentally incompatibility has reached its peak. Very often they begin to argue and quarrel with each other. Gradually their arguments were turning into silences and the silences were stretching and deepening. He was disappearing into them’ (p.138). The gulf in their married life is widened. Matrimonial silence prevails between them. They are alienated from each other. Discussing the views of Marx on self-alienation Rajiv Sharma declares that “Man’s producing, social and sensuous life conditions have deteriorated due to self-alienation.” Self-alienation proves to be the most distorted form of alienation. In order to understand the unknown, Matteo keeps shuttling between his family and the Abode of Bliss. Sophie misunderstands his love and devotion for the Mother. He clarifies her doubts by saying that there is difference between ‘sacred and profane love’.

Matteo’s love is not based on the philosophy of loving all and sharing the suffering of all. It is not at all comprehensive. He is totally illusioned and lacks psychological equilibrium. According to Mrinalini Solanki, his “Psychological attitudes, social pressures and expectation from self and society, place him in unique circumstances to fight against for which he finds himself ill equipped.” He feels as though his self-worth is under attack and consequently faces a threat to his existence. He calls Sophie a destroyer. According to Erich Fromm; “Man’s existential contradiction results in a state of constant disequilibrium.” Matteo does not follow the abiding values in social life and this inability on his part results in personality disintegration and ontological insecurity. Both Sophie and Matteo are alienated and withdrawn from each other. Sophie becomes pregnant once again. Soon after the delivery she wishes to leave
India. She considers the ashram a prison and the ashramis as strangers. All these years she is culturally alienated. She is under the impression that people outside the ashram are normal and she hopes that she can mix with them freely and easily. But when she enters the compartment of the train some of the passengers stare at her strangely and fascinatedly. Now she thinks that she is ‘Pinned up with other travellers ... and ... she felt herself caged in a zoo, or prison forced into surrendering but freedom and privacy’. Her feelings of psychological alienation make her realise that the life she led at the ashram ‘provided a freedom in which she had lived without giving such matters a thought ... She fails to understand the harsh realities of life from the beginning’.

When Sophie receives a telegram about the sickness of her husband, she runs back to India without any forethought. She wishes to be with him at once. She meets him in the hospital. Being materialistic and practical by nature she wants to keep her primary ties strong with her husband from the beginning and so she asks him, ‘why, Matteo, why?’ Why can we not be together again at home with the children?’ (p.4). Like an ideal wife she wants her husband should leave the Ashram after he recovers from his illness and so she suggests ‘when you are well, Matteo we will leave’. She wants to take him back along with her soon after his recovery from sickness. She desires to lead a happy life with her husband and children at home. But her suggestions infuriates him and he is quite unwilling to accompany her as he has been waiting for a sign. Coleman rightly observes, ‘we tend to avoid those aspects of the situation which are traumatic or self-devaluating or contradictory to our assumptions.’ He tries to philosophise Sophie. He hopes that the Mother will take him with her on her search. The power and influence
of the Mother has turned Matteo into a stone. As he is not moved by the entreaties of his wife, she sets off to investigate the Mother's providence and career to discredit her.

Sophie goes to Alexandria to know the true history of the Mother. She finds that the Mother is the daughter of a French school mistress and a Westernised Egyptian academic in Alexandria. Her original name is Laila. As a child she wandered in the lanes and streets lonely and came home late at night. When her late comings are questioned by her parents, she stares at them and tells them that she does not know where she has gone. If her mother asks her what she has done anywhere she tightens her mouth and retorts very angrily like a possessed girl. The enquiries of her parents about her late comings irritate her. Just like Matteo she is a born recluse. She always prefers loneliness and wanders all alone in the streets and lanes calmly. As she grows older she returns home still later at night. Her irregularity still frightens her parents. Whenever she is furious she tears at her hair and then shouts. 'You want me to be prisoner ... that is how I feel here - prisoner' (p.165). She considers their home a prison. To walk and wander alone is a pleasure to her. It seems that her dancing is inborn. She wants to make herself free by becoming a perfect dancer. She does not like to suppress her innate desire of learning dance inspite of her parents disapproval. They decide to send her to Cairo and from there to Paris for further studies. In Cairo she proves herself to be a better student in her studies but at the same time develops her contacts with a group of young Islamic anti-imperialists. It horrifies her parents and so they pack her off to her French aunt in Paris. She behaves like a savage there.
Even in Paris Laila wants to be alone wandering through museums, browsing at book-stalls, walking down stony streets in the heat of early summer. She always keeps herself separate both within and without. Drifting through the alien city lonely, one day Laila stops at a dance house and requests the dance mistress to instruct her in dance. When the mistress begins to explain her the postures of dance, she is not convinced with the style of explaining dance. She has her own inherent inexplicable ideas of dance. The small statue of Natraj which she sees in the book-stall enhances her fascination for Indian dance and the books of the East she purchased there influence her mind, especially the important lines she reads in 'The Aitreya Brahman of the Rig Veda'; 'There is no happiness for him who does not travel Rohita! Thus we have heard Living in the society of man, the best man becomes a sinner ....'Therefore, wander ....' have a great influence on her mind. Indian dance. 'Krishna Leela' she watches in Paris fascinates her very much. She 'found herself knotted in agony upon her seat, so intense was her desire to leap up and perform to that music. This, she know, was what she had sought so long and missed pains' (p.201). She feels that no dance on earth is equal to Indian dance.

Laila might have been a perfect dancer in her previous birth. So the very music of Indian dance moves her body and enthralls her heart. Her reminiscences of dance and music make her feel that she might have been an Indian and belonged to Indian dance troupe in her previous birth. That might be the reason why she felt a stranger to her parents, people and the places she had visited. She identifies herself with that of the dancers on the stage but not with the audience that she had once been one of them, possessed what they had, lost it but now saw she must grasp and recover it ... for surely
that was why she had come to Paris' (p.203). She is filled with the thirst for spiritual enlightenment. Here she is swept off by the beauty and spirituality of the Indian dance performance. She wants to attain spiritual enlightenment through dance alone. She is quite confident that Krishna alone can lead her on the path of spiritual enlightenment by teaching her the lessons of dance. Therefore she begs him to accept her as his disciple. She considers him as Lord Srikrishna. Of course he proves himself an earthly Krishna in leading Laila on the path of spirituality. He is no doubt, a successful Guru in enlightening her mind with the lessons of dance but not a sincere preacher of spirituality. He finds no difference between sacred love and profane love. He carries her off on tour to Venice and to the U.S.A. In a week she becomes so proficient in dance. She worships him and becomes his mistress. The tour flops and the dance troupe comes back to India. As Laila has been obsessed with the idea of spiritual enlightenment she leaves the troupe in order to go on with her search for enlightenment. She also has lost interest in dance. She blames Krishna for not leading her on the path of spiritual enlightenment as he has promised her. Now she realises that Krishna has taught her only 'devotion to worldly success, to financial gain, to fame not to the true light for which I came'. She has been under the wrong notion that her dance itself is a worship of God. She has come to India with the hope of seeing the Almighty. As all her hopes of seeing the Lord are shattered she feels sorry, frustrated and alienated. She fails to see India of her imagination and dreams and her mysticism, spirituality and divinity. Now she craves for spiritual life.

When Laila is neglected by Krishna she feels lost, lonely and alienated and begins to cry. 'where is my home? I left my home so long ago and so far behind that I can not return to it. Yet I have not found the Lord's dwelling that I came to India to
find. I am lost ... I am cast out without a refuge or haven? Am I to perish alone in the
darkness ..." (p.289). God's dwelling place is her home. She has lost it long back. Now
she is in constant and untiring search of it. The aim of her journey from Egypt and Paris
to India is to find God. She has lost her right path to God during the journey. She has
some stray traces of the way to the Abode of God. Now she feels that all her hopes and
dreams she had about India are merely delusions. But she is quite optimistic of attaining
spiritual enlightenment and finding a Master, a Guru. She has already some signs from
her master. She prays God to forgive her and drive out her blindness and give her the
vision of truth. With the vision of the Supreme she hopes to enter into harmony with the
spirit. The very essence of spiritual enlightenment is merging oneself with the Soul of
God by attaining divinity. Alienation is inherent in Laila from the beginning of
childhood. So she does not like to have any attachment with her parents. Now she
detaches herself from the dances Krishna. There is total detachment from her former
relations. Hegel says about self-alienation, "... the other worldly consciousness is self-
alienated. In turning away from the world of social substance, it is alienated from its
actualisation, its inner nature from its existence."21

While going on a pilgrimage to an ashram in the foot hills of the Himalayas,
Laila gazes at the passing landscape of India. There is decay and destruction in the
landscape. It is the barren earth littered with the bones of animals which died of thirst
and starvation. It disappoints her very much. All her hopes of India, its mysticism and
spirituality are shattered by the destructed and decayed landscape. The landscape
symbolises India. Symbolism is integral part of Desai's novel. She is "essentially a
artistically."22 Now she thinks that, "This earth was forsaken by the Great spirit. The Great Spirit had departed from it in despair and left it as it was - caught in the nightmare of death and desolation ... I had come in search of beauty, truth and wisdom only to find them fled. How those prophetic words of Mrs. Du Best came to me! India is a form of death" (p.294).

Getting out of the compartment at the end of pilgrimage, Laila sees a holy man under 'the Tree of Eternity' (banyan tree). The holy man "dwells in another realm and for him time and space had a meaning other than we could comprehend, who travelled bodily without escape from (himself) ourselves' (p.296). Laila feels thrilled on seeing the holy man. It has been her desire 'to be free of this world and escape into another, a better and a brighter' world. The banyan tree appears to her an earthly sun. Now all her shattered hopes to have spiritual enlightenment by finding a Master begin to revive. The banyan tree and the holy man are symbols or signs she has already had about the spiritual enlightenment. She begins to gaze at the sky and the stars at night at the hill-town of temples (Haridwar) on the banks of a river (the Ganga). She has a feeling that the stars seem to call her and say, 'Climb higher'. As she climbs the hill higher and higher her Master appears to her on the dark hill-top beneath a stately tree, stands watching her by the light of the evening star and by the sight of the rising moon. There is sweet calm upon his golden face. He has waited many years there for Laila to go to him. This is nothing but the vision of God that she sees. Erich Fromm observes 'God is truth. God is justice. In this development God ceases to be a person a man, a father; he becomes the symbol of the principle of unity behind the manifoldness of phenomena
cannot have name." The seed of spirituality has been sown in Laila since the beginning of her childhood. Now it has borne fruit. She folds her arms to greet him as a mark of devotion. Her master pronounced that she is 'Shakti', 'Durga', 'Kali', and 'Parvati'. He asks her to follow him. Laila returns to her room, packs her belongings and starts her journey on foot to the ashram. She baths in the river to wash her sins off and makes herself pure as a new-born, fit to meet with the Divine. She goes to the Great sage, Prem Krishna's ashram and joins him as Radha of Indian mythology and remains there. Now she feels that her search for spiritual enlightenment is fulfilled and her quest for unity with the supreme and Divine is realised. Thus after many vicissitudes Laila finds a suitable Guru and has a mystical experience with "daggers of joy" piercing her breast and turns into the Mother.

The men or women who became or turned into Babas, Swamis, Mothers, Saints, Gurus and established their respective ashrams had generally alienated from themselves from the very beginning of their childhood. They had been in the habit of serious thinking and meditation. When they succeed in arriving at right conclusions and attain some knowledge of spirituality and mysticism, they establish their ashrams and give the message of God to their devotees. Only in alienated meditation and with strenuous trials one can get spirituality. All the real Babas and Yogis and Mothers are divine presences and therefore they cease to be men and women. Alienation sometimes leads people on the wrong path to their doom into the dark pit and sometimes on the right path of spirituality to the Abode of God. It is true in both the cases of Matteo and Laila. Laila became the Mother where as Matteo's family life is ruined.
By the time Sophie comes back to the ashram with the full details of Leila’s life history she finds it half abandoned. The mother is dead and Matteo has left when the Mother dies. Matteo’s journey of transformation is stalled in between. His search for spirituality is unfulfilled and the quest for unity with the supreme and Divine remains unrealised. His anguish and frustration is manifold because while relentlessly following the trail of the Divine, he has neglected his duties and responsibilities towards family society and his ownself. His renunciation leads only to blank emptiness of negation. His ignorance, his obsession with moral image of the Mother alienating himself from his surroundings, hamper his growth, his free thinking. As he is not aware of the highest reality that surrounds him he does not realise the reality of his own soul. Journey to Ithaca is "a voyage undertaken to discover the natural wholeness of being and how to experience it in one's day-to-day existence."24
REFERENCE NOTES


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17. Sharma, Rajiv., Ibid., p.17.


