Chapter 7

A Spiritual Quest:
An analysis of *Journey to Ithaca*
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Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca (1996) is an addition to the novel of encounter in the field of Indian English novel that describes the quest theme. The fictional world of Anita Desai is not inhibited by common people, ordinary human beings, who wish to go about their daily work, do their best for their children cultivate their won garden and live at peace with their human context. Maya, Monisha, Amla, Sita, Nanda Kaul and Bim the female protagonists of her earlier novels feel fragmented and full of despair and anguish as their interpersonal relations are characterized by dissonance and despair. The joy of living is not for them.

Anita Desai whose prose is richly precise and who, in novels such as In custody or Baumgartner's Bombay, has written with illuminating vividness about places and the way people inhabit them – ventures this time into more rare field territory. Mysticism is a challenging subject for the novel, a form rooted in the tangible and temporal. Like her characters she sets out on a quest for spiritual meaning. Otherwise all Desai's novels reveal her persistent concern with the themes of anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptation necessitated by the threats to the individuals identity and relation to reality. She emphasizes certain other aspects also, which some individuals find significant in their social interaction such as interpersonal relations, the ultimate reality, general futility in life nothingness, worthlessness.

In this novel the spiritual quest of two characters has been described, that of Laila in the 1920's and Matteo in the 1970's Desai identifies the
restless yearning of those sensitive souls, who live under the same sky as others but see different horizons, as the epigraph of the novel conveys:

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.

To arrive there is your ultimate goal.

Journey to Ithaca breaks away from the traditional treatment of the themes of east-west encounter. Unlike them, does not comply with a usually demeaning image of India with the idea of bolstering the white man's burden or a civilizing mission. In Desai's earlier novels, Bye Bye, Blackbird and Baumgartner's Bombay, Nayantara Sehgal's Rich Like Us, or Gita Mehta's Karma Kola, the white protagonists come to India to colonize it, which involves not the capture of the territory, but the capture of Indian Novelists' point of view and consciousness. Makarand Paranjape aptly comments: "These books present sympathetic account of western sojourn in Indian; often Indian characters end up looking pathetic in comparison to these 'favoured' foreigners."

In Journey to Ithaca, however we discover a new posture, as Laila's encounter with Indian attains a mythical dimension – 'a rite of passage' in a sensitive tale of initiation, experience and the process of seeking enlightenment one may be inclined to take the view that Desai herself, in her search of values and ultimate knowledge, emphatically participates in the journey of her heroine from Egypt, France, Venice to America and finally ending in India. As a widely travelled writer, she seems to have arrived to a "home coming", at last; through the protagonists, growing perspective, she makes a genuine contact with India as an outsider, though being herself a cosmopolitan insider.

Born in an agnostic and academic family in Alexandria, Laila's parents are teachers. But curiously, she is not interested in the dogmatic modes of
pursuing knowledge much to the worry of her parents. Since her early childhood, bookish knowledge is meaningless for her. Studies put off her mind and she wants to be the mistress of her own thoughts and action. Her mother comments, "such a small child so headstrong so independent, it was dangerous, any one could see that."(164) she would roam about as a child and when asked where she was, she would say, "I don’t know myself. I go down the street, I turn a corner – I don’t know where I am." When her mother asked what did she do, strange was her answer, "do ? I do nothing .......... I walk, I play, I look. But I do nothing.". Her detachment and her furious outbursts reflect that she is seeking something beyond ordinary comprehension. "You want me to be your prisoner," she shouted, "That is how I feel here a prisoner"(165) her mother is shocked to realize that Laila has some definite plans about her future, knows for certain what she wants to achieve out of life. "I want – I want to dance ....... Not sit here, reading, reading, reading."(165) the freedom she aspires for is the freedom towards fulfillment of her unconscious desires. Like Matteo and Baumgartner she scorns her mother's material possessions. She finds the silver ware, photographs, china dishes and statuettes to be the emblems of her imprisonment.

Laila like Matteo is sent away from home to Cairo to further her academics. At Cairo superficially she pursues her studies with all diligence. There she comes in contact with Muslim girls and although she is not much interested in institutionalized religion, yet she joining Koran classes. Instead of joining westernized girls, she prefers to make friends with a single devout Muslim girl Fatima, and with her goes to the Mullah who teaches recitation of Koran. She wondered about Fatima, "What was this creature, a good Muslim ? It had never ventured into her parents agnostic, academic home."(163) the Koran class was different from the French classes where
pupils took the liberty of giggling and winking: "No one took such liberties with the Mullah. The girls kept their eyes to the written page.... And Laila saw a way of learning that had no opening to debate, discussion, doubt or argument as it had been in her parent's home. Here was a book, a subject, a doctrine that did not allow questioning. It was powerful and authoritative in a strange and inexplicable way; it pleased her even as it puzzled." (163-164). From "Her appearance and studious demeanor they never suspected that Laila might have secret life, a night life."(174) In fact, Laila is in search of freedom. Her friend, Fatima is not aware of the upheaval going on in Laila's mind. Her escapes into the maze of lanes in the Khan El Khalili sound strange even to her parents. In her search for freedom she is unable to control her mind and her senses are like unmanageable horses. "For the truth was that she was drawn first in one direction, then another wherever she saw passion taken to its extreme, whether celebratory or ascetic."(174) Robin Barrow observes: If we take being happy to mean do what you want to do, then it is obviously true and whenever we can, we can pursue happiness."3

From Cairo, she is sent to Paris to live with her aunt for her further studies. She contemplates. "Paris was not a city that stood in water nor was it the abode of gods and goddesses"(177). Laila is not at all pleased with the idea of going to Paris because by now her inner self is able to give directions to her religious quest. The religious instinct induces her to recognize and submit to the authority of conscience, the instrument which records the voice of God. Quite early in her life, her instincts assert themselves prompting her to do this or that and impetition her in one direction or another. From the very beginning Laila's mind's eye is et some where in eternity and she seeks to enjoy its bliss.

193
At Aunt Francoise’s place she finds herself out of place in the prim and proper household of the affluent. She hates the discipline of the house and behaves in her own defiant wayward manner to the chagrin of her Aunt. She would live slovenly and in an “uncivilized” way and was called a “savage” by the aunt she finds her household disgusting as the glass windows are always screen’d with lace curtains which are never drawn aside. She has the temperament of a free wonderer and the rich surroundings of her aunt’s house eclipse her vision of spirituality. She wants to keep herself away from the materialistic pursuits of life and to achieve this she is quite capable of unpredictable behaviour. Like Raka in Fire on the Mountain, she also finds it difficult to act according to her Aunt’s commands and reacts violently by creating a mess in the house. Blaming her sister for her upbringing, Aunt comments, “she has brought up a savage”4. Laila’s behaviour is the outcome of her Aunt’s non-acceptance of her ways. Laila gets pleasure and satisfaction both by upsetting her Aunt and her household. She find it difficult to survive without being unnatural. In Fire on the Mountain, Raka says to Nanda Kaul, “Look, Nani I have set the forest on fire, “Look, Nani look the forest is on fire”. Laila also wants to follow her own unique and strange way of living. She declares that she wouldn’t eat meat “And from now on I shall eat only bread, fruit and vegetables” (184). And when insisted upon by her Aunt she bursts out as her religious instincts come to the surface again “I am a vegetarian. No one will make me eat the flesh of slaughtered animals. Do you know what you are eating? Have you been into a butcher’s shop to see it when it is raw?” (178).

When she finds her Aunt, uncle and cousins contradicting her views, her instinct of self defence forces her to keep away from the house as much as possible and “avoid aggravation of the situation by constant proximity
and friction”(186). She preferred roaming in the Luxembourg Gardens and
the Jordin des Plaubes where there were several animals in cages. There
she cultivated a peculiar rapport with a panther: "Reaching out one of its
gigantic paws, it dangled it before her, quite gently, as if inviting her to
shake hands ....... She began to smile, then laugh, as one might laugh at
the play of a child, merging in its delight in a moment of unconsciousness
a moment when time either pauses or even moves back instead of forward
.... They were the only two that existed in that enclosed world they had
made......... They ambulated together, panther and girl. Keeping pace,
sending out messages of mutual admiration building a web between them
of delicious complicity.”(184-185) this relationship with the animals grows
further, and she would communicate with them in her Ashram in India. In
Parish she loses interest in French Literature. “Even if Baudelaire, Rimbaud
and Musset had invited them into this world once, the invitation had lost its
warmth, leaving nothing, not even a scrap”(179). Further “abandoning her
French studies for durythemic exercises, swaying and twisting in her night
gown in the bedroom satisfies Laila, Madame Beunier’s dictum “use your
body to translate into movement, the rhythm, the melody, and the harmony
you hear”(198) guides and inspires her. Like a puppet, she can’t condition
herself to the music. The dance actions of Madame Beurnier are insignificant
and meaningless to her. Freedom of thought and action is the source of
life to her.

In Paris, she is ill at ease in her Aunt’s house. Like good Christians,
they go to church on Sunday, but Laila prefers to move about in the cathedral
premises instead of attending service. When the aunt asks her to accompany
them to church, she says, “I am a seeker after truth and have given up all
orthodox religion.... I find them the repositories of ignorance and suppression
Laila keeps shuttling between faith and doubt and does not get a benefiting answer from anyone. It is a this search that bring her to India though in a different way.

Her first exposure to India comes through the bookshop of Madam Lacan selling the books L’orient and L’Indel. Here she browses through Hindu classics. At first she is attracted by the statues and paintings but later graduates to serious books on Indian culture and one day opens up the Aitevya Brahmmanan of the Rig Veda and read what would become her own life, the life of a seeker:

There is no happiness for him who does not travel Rohta! thus we have heard living in the society of man the best man becomes a sinner.....Therefore wander! The feet of the wanderer are like the flowers, his soul is growing and reaping the fruit; and all his sins are destroyed by his fatigues in wandering. Therefore Wander! The fortune of him who is sitting, sits: it rises when he rises; it sleeps when he sleeps, it moves when he moves, therefore Wander! (188)

One day a poster, pined to the door of the book shop, fascinates Laila strangely. She manages to buy a ticket to see the Krishna Laila performance of the dance troupe she is fascinated by an Indian dance troupe led by Krishna and she describes it to her aunt; “it was a dance of gods” (199) seeing the troupe perform dance she feels like leaping in ecstatic joy, so intense was her desire to leap up and perform to that music. “This she knew, was what she had sought so long and missed. (292).
For Laila the piercing and ecstatic music and the tinkling of the anklets become an epitome of the other worldly existence. She confesses to Madam Lacan, “I can’t believe they are real …… I want to run and catch them”(202) she is quite certain in her mind that she belongs to those on the stage. When offered an opportunity, Laila agrees to join the troupe and take dance lessons. She decides to join the troupe much to the curiosity and a bit of skepticism of its leader Krishna. He doubts her suitability for the Indian dance. Unlike the western opera or ballet, as it is not just the movement and music for entertainment. It is much more; it is spiritual as Krishna says, “I have seen ballet - I have been to the opera also. It is entertainement only. Not spiritual like the Indian dance. No spiritual side at all.”(203) Madam Lacan is in favour of the European dance for Laila. “Laila can study dance here in Paris. Paris is the centre of the dance world. We have the ballet here, the opera also and the modern dance movement. Do you advise her to give up such fine possibilities and take up Indian dance instead.”(202).

But Laila is very sure of herself and says to Krishna. “I will not be a European dancer. I want to be an Indian dancer.(200). But he has doubts. “So white, so small, Muslim, Egyptian. How can you be an Indian dancer?” (200). Even though she is accepted by Krishna, Vijaya another member of the troupe is bitter and sarcastic “You think you are Indian dancer now. No. Indian dancer must practice from childhood. Must have training. Must know our language, understand our music. Not everybody can be Indian dancer”(220). But nothing can deter her from her resolve to be an Indian dancer and she learns Indian dances quickly. From Paris the troupe moves on to Venice.

In Venice the troupe stays with the affluent signora Duraute who is a great admirer of Krishna and Indian culture. We are informed that Krishna is
a Brahmin from Banaras, the holiest city in India. But Gianni, the housekeeper and chef is not impressed by the troupe. Irritated by their practice, he shouts, “Crazy! ... Crazy. This house has gone mad dancing at night when the whole of Venice lies asleep”(214). One of Signora’s friend is Ambrose, an Englishman who calls on her. But his reaction is typical of colonial superciliousness for him, it is not a great thing. He has no appreciation for Indian dance. “The Englishman did not seem to find the Indian dancer quite so wonderfully exotic as the Venetians did and the Indian dancer seemed no more enthusiastic at meeting the Englishman”(229) where as Signora’s Italian friends like the Peacock dance performed by Laila. Ambrose has nothing but contempt and sneers. “Oh, not that tired old peacock dance again! They scarcely pass that off as classical, can they? Why, it is what street performers put on in India” (231).

From Venice the troupe goes to the USA and here comes the greatest disappointment. The sponsor Mrs. Du Best is not in New York and the troupe has a hard time. However, Jai Bhawabani of Bombay who owns Asia Bazaar comes to their rescue. Their performance is arranged but the programme is thoroughly reduced and watered down to cater to the quotidian yankees. The American culture is childish in the eyes of Krishna, “This is America ... we too must become children like them” (245). Here clash of cultures is most telling. Herbert Moody, the agent who organizes their shows has no appreciation for Indian music and dance and he condescendingly declares it to be the general opinion, not his own alone: “That music you folks play ... It just drives everyone right out of the theatre” he said flatly, “Sounds like everyone of your instrument is out of tune. I am just telling you what everyone says. No one’s going to put up with that, or pay good money do something about it.”
"About the music of my country?
You are asking me to create a music for
American ears instead? To throw away
my own heritage?" "Yeah, at least, while
you are dancing for us," Mr. Moody said,
without a bit of sympathy (251)

But Krishna reconciles with the situation in order to survive. The troupe
tastes another case of racial discrimination and white superiority at Holyoke
where at a cheap boarding house, the proprietress says grace before dinner,
"And may our visitors from the dark lands see the light and give up their
pagan ways to follow thy path, O Lord" (256).

During these tours unconsciously an amorous relationship seems
to breed somewhere underneath in the heart of Krishna and he gives a
new dimension to the dance of Radha and Krishna called Hindu Wedding.
It shows Laila as a coy bride. Laila is quick to sense that this dance had
nothing to do with "any religious belief on spiritual exercise, Indian or other-
wise" (253). Laila feels betrayed as she wanted to dance not for displaying
her physical charm or emotions. For her dance is the symbol of the union
of worshipper and the worshipped. In due course of time dancing becomes
a profession for her, a source of financial gain and a part of daily routine
she gets sick performing at various places as she does not get spiritual
contentment after these performance. Her predicament at this point of time
reminds one of a hymn in Rig Veda:

Within it first arouse desire,
The primal germ of mind,
Which nothing with existence links
As sages searching find (1.6)
Her Sadhana, her devotion, does not lead her to spiritual enlightenment and one day she says, "Krishna, I will leave. I will not go on." (264) Krishna decides to leave for India with Laila, The frustration of her inner urges brings her to the stage of melancholic depression. Robin Barrow rightly says: "obsessional neurosis has the predominant thought, impulse or feeling which completely dominates the consciousness of the individual from time to time and causes great mental suffering if not gratified" (146). This is what happens with Laila when she says, "Because of these headaches I cannot sleep" (264) she is obsessed with the idea of Indian Temple Dance. This is the only incentive for her survival.

From the Indian of her imagination, Laila comes to the real India. On the way she is "traveling eastwards to meet the great, sun, the great light. I must prepare my soul for the sweet union .... O Mysterious India. I can feel you stirring in the dark" (274). But the real India is not what she had imagined. When she visits the Mahalakhsami temple in Bombay, she is not impressed at all. She is not after institutionalized religion or rituals: "This is not where I will worship – I cannot be made to worship what I do not believe. The truth is elsewhere. My search is not over. I must continue it. O where is my Lord whose calm face shines only with the pure light of truth?" (275). Her fascination for dance too is over. When Krishna tries to convince her that dance is worship, she retorts, "you have shown me devotion to worldly success to financial gain to fame – not to the true light for which I came" (276). Laila is hospitalized in a Missionary hospital where a nurse, Mary gives her a crucifix to make her feel better but she throws it away, "Do not give me that Mary, never give me what is so ugly and so sad. Do you think I need to have an image of sin and suffering? Take it away. I want joy and beauty and love...... I am no sinner. My dwelling place is not in sin and suffering but in truth and
beauty" (281). From Bombay she goes on a pilgrimage with Vijaya’s family. She thinks about India and what she wanted from her: what I wanted of India was the outward manifestations of what already existed inside me, what had been growing inside me like a flower grown from a seed I had discovered in a Paris bookshop of my past” (285) seeing an ascetic sitting serenely under the holy banyan tree, the tree of eternity, she feels the great desire that she had always had “ever since I was a child, to be through a maze of her doubts and illusions” (286) she reaches moments of revelation, a very personal mystic experience of union with the Lord, reminding us of Tagore’s Gitanjali. In her Guru she finds her Ithaca and in him she realizes ‘Him’: “Here I dwell now where I was always meant to dwell and where I resolve to live, never leaving His side, His true devotee and Lover” (293).

Laila’s experience, involvement and struggle lead her towards her goal, “the harmony with the supreme light. She wants to rise above the earthly pains, sorrow, desires and greed’s she only wants the outward, manifestation of what existed inside me” (295) she rises above the limits of time and space. In his monumental work, The Life Divine, Shri Aurobindo traces in detail the peculiar features of the stair of ascent or the ladder of transformation. According to him “objective truth is only approached at the very end of the journey, only then is gained the ability to see things as they are”5. One must live religion in truth and deed and not merely profess it in word. “Faith without work is dead”6 says St. Paul. At Ashram, Laila known as Mother finds pleasure serving the humanity and preaching to adopt the path of selfless duty. In the Ashram she treats all equally, believing there exits a part of the eternal truth in the hearts of all. The mother’s preaching’s advise the devotees to try to attain complete consciousness in one’s inner spiritual life. This precisely is the most needful and important business of
our lives as no one can experience depth without stopping and becoming aware of oneself. The gist of the Mother's philosophy is that the soul progresses from individual body to community, from community to universe and from universe to infinity.

This way of life leads man to a state of pure joy. The mother also preaches that in his consciousness, man must clearly realize some central truth which will give him perspective over the widest possible field. The same view is expressed in the unpanishads, “know thine own self or realize the one great principle of unity that there is in every man. All over egoistic impulses, our selfish desires, obscure our free vision of the soul”.

For they only indicate our own narrow self. The Mother gives various examples to Matteo to make him aware of the reality in life. According to her, any ordinary human being can attain knowledge and eternal bliss by performing routine work. Relating to others, sharing sorrow and happiness with all around oneself. To understand something is to find in it something of our own, and it is the discovery of ourselves outside us which makes us glad. She says, “so bliss can enter, only on that should your mind focus.” (116). Therefore, when one is conscious of one's soul, one perceives the inner being that transcends his ego and has its deeper affinity with all. Talking about the divine love, she suggests that clarity of mind is the prime requirement to “the way of Bhakti...... they way of love. Here we teach only love... Here we dedicate ourselves to love... what we do here, we do out of love”(117). This means that whomsoever one love, in him one finds one's own soul in the highest sense. Thus love is the highest bliss that man can attain for through it it alone he truly knows that he is more than himself, and that he is at one with all. The Mother, talking about the bee-hive and busy bee, asserts
that everyone in the Ashram works. In order to fill the hive with sweet nectar, one should toil. "In the same way if one wants to nourish one's soul it should be filled with spiritual nectar, I mean honey made from spiritual nectar, nectar to nourish the soul."(118). Thus her ideology is very much similar to the one in ancient Vedantism: "Truth is the honey of all beings; all beings the honey of truth. The bright eternal self that lives as the truth in man, are one and the same; that is immortality, that is spirit, that's all." Thus the Mother tries to clear the vision of Matteo. His faith can bear fruit only when he perceived the things from his minds eye.

Laila's spiritual journey has nothing to do with religious rituals on institutionalised religion. She begins to discover that a personal realization of oneself can only come from one's inner consciousness. The many sided-ness of Indian religious tradition being Dharmic is truly beyond the theist and atheist categories. It polycentric nature congenially embraces the whole world and all its being, where trees, rivers, animals and the stone inhere the cosmic spirit. In this Indian world view, everything – charachara – is a cosmos entity. Unlike the west, with no sovereign sense of evil, the most feared are also respected and worshipped, as the snake on the festival of "Naag Panchami" Man's kinship with the world of nature proceeds from the Karmic theory of rebirth; one may be born as an animal, insect plant or a stone according to one's past Karma in describing Lila's growth from Laila. Desai seems to be restoring or trying to understand her own Indian self through this novel. Her protagonist Laila's questing spirit experiments with multiple cultures, practices and beliefs as an untheorized space and finds that while the truth was ever now, ever changing, elusive and unfixable, India, her Ithaca could be a living Sanatana, home of enlightenment, where she could after all find herself.
Thus the voyage of discovery undertaken by Laila and Matteo the male protagonist in a way is the story of the predicament of the modern man caught in the contrived dialectical opposition between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be.’ The Journey to Ithaca is undertaken to discover the natural wholeness of being and how to experience it in one’s day to day existence. It attempts to explain why man exists in perpetual conflict, what are the sources of fragmentation and what is the mode of recovering the integrated being. The poem quoted by the novelist in the beginning of the novel hints at the essence of the philosophy in the novel

Visit hosts of Egyptian cities ...... to
learned and learn from those who have
knowledge.... rich with all you have gained
on the way.... with such great wisdom you
have gained, with so much experience (IX)

Retrieval of integration, of wholeness or bliss is the outcome of experience, meditation and selfless love. It is a state which comes into being spontaneously, when in total attention, man has clearly understood the nature of the ceaseless process of self-construction. It is a state of total love, freedom and understanding.

True religion is not what one gets from outside, from books and teachers. It is not the religion of routine which one adopts as a matter of habit. It is aspiration of every human soul, that which unfolds within oneself, that which is built by one's life blood. It is the fulfillment of our nature, in which there is joy which overflows into the worlds service.

S. Radha Krishnan says “Religion is not a way of life but a way into life”. Journey to Ithaca is thus Anita Desai’s statement regarding religion’s
relevance to life. She seems to have come to believe that the fundamental need of the world, far deeper than any social, political or economic re-adjustment, is a spiritual re-awakening, a recovery of faith. Faith alone can guide and help a generation which is perplexed at its failure to find satisfaction and is groping for enlightenment. Only a living faith in God can enable man to overcome the paralyzing sense of despair and create a less imperfect life. She also suggests that believing in the ultimate reality is not merely the end of a process of ratiocination but is an act of faith based on experience. Religion is a force of a belief cleansing the inward parts and guiding one from passion to peace through self conquest. Through portrayal of the Mother, Anita Desai argues that saints are not stained glass figure, remote and ethereal in their sanctity. There is something in them which one would like to spread everywhere in the world. In their blood and bones, in the breath of their speech, in the lights and shades of their personalities, is a mystery that can be lived but not spoken in words. The new society needs a new universal relation. By it she does not mean a uniform religion but a religion of awareness and love, wisdom and compassion, of truth and love. Religion is the name for man's total conscious attitude towards life as it is found enlightened by rational awareness and knowledge. The polarization of the divine and the profane – the spiritual and the mundane - generate out of spiritual vagueness and ambiguity.
NOTES