Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) can be termed as another variant of the East-West theme. This time, it deals with a spiritual East as against a materialistic West. The main theme here is, the journey to the discovery of the self. This discovery is achieved in a mystical manner by the two main protagonists.

The outer materialistic world wherein they are members of the worldly community does not satisfy Matteo and Laila as their bent of mind makes them yearn for a life beyond the merely worldly. Both therefore set out on an inner quest to discover their true selves and thereby receive visions of the Cosmic and the Eternal Light. Both realise that their lives are contained within this Cosmic Infinity – the Divine – and hence, they search frantically for a spiritual guru through whom they would be able to “see and recognise the Absolute” (143).

Even as early as in his boyhood, Matteo had given signs of being different when he refuses meat, gravy, pastries and insists on only bread and water.

Matteo’s curiosity is aroused by a book belonging to his tutor, Fabian – Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East*. This becomes the
book that first ignites the spark of spiritual quest in Matteo. After Fabian’s abrupt departure, Matteo too, refuses to stay at home. Growing thin and haggard, he scours the hillsides and isolated areas and spends the nights either on a worn rug on the floor or in silent abbeys and ruined chapels. This shows his search for an anchor to provide mental and spiritual stability as well as his giving up of physical comforts.

Finally, although he does become somewhat “calm, gentle, detached” (291), he no longer cares for worldly affairs. After his marriage to Sophie, he sets out with her on his spiritual quest by coming to India. Matteo seems convinced that there appears to be a “design”, or a “pattern”(35) to their wanderings for it appears that at every turn, they are “given directions” and “taken deeper”(35) to his ultimate destination.

Matteo’s spiritual journey begins with a visit to a “saint”(37) in Bombay whose actions only appear to be “party tricks”(40) to a practical Sophie although Matteo disagrees. He is next taken to Chowpatty beach which seemingly is full of “saints” – a limbless beggar holding a can of alms between his teeth and a woman wearing a string of wooden beads and lecturing to a “reverential crowd”(42).

As their lodgings prove to be inadequate for the monsoon, they are taken to a dirty and squalid ashram. There, Matteo follows all the religious rituals. Yet he realizes that this is not what he has been searching for. Meanwhile, at this stage, worldly pleasures do have some charm for
him. This is brought out by the instance of his spending an evening in a hotel in Juhu dining with Sophie and Pierre Eduard.

The next stage of Matteo's journey finds him on a pilgrimage to a shrine outside the city. When they approach it, Matteo's strong emotions leave Sophie bewildered. He admits to Sophie that he is in need of a sage to guide him. Thereafter, the pilgrimage through India "becomes suffused with the rich and aromatic haze of marijuana" (58). While this penetrates Sophie till it becomes her very "being" (58), it leaves Matteo with a feeling of disillusionment.

Agonising over his present anchorless life, he rents a room for himself to be alone in order to meditate. He yearns to have a "vision of spiritual truth" (66) and realises that his life would prove meaningless if he cannot have such a vision. /\

Matteo now reaches the second stage of his spiritual odyssey when all worldly company becomes unbearable to him. He wanders away to desolate areas to be alone and away from everyone.

Hearing of a temple in that region, Matteo goes in search of it. Coming to a grove of trees, he sees lodged in a crack of the banyan's trunk a smooth, round stone. Finding nothing to suggest that the stone could be an object of worship, Matteo turns away disappointed. Just then, he sees an old wrinkled man come by and plucking some flowers go to the stone and murmur prayers. As he departs, Matteo studies the stone again. As he continues to gaze at it:
... he saw that ... was not a stone ... but a circle and it contained within it another circle, and another; that there was no beginning and no end ... they were infinity. That circle was the universe itself containing world within world ... sphere within sphere ... (68).

To Matteo's “dazzled” eyes these “revolved within each other and yet remained perfectly static, maintaining a total balance ... harmony” which indicated that it could “only be divine”. Matteo now finds the stone to glow brilliantly making him believe that it surely was “divine light” (68).

This vision at last makes Matteo understand what had brought him to India. It was only here that a stone could have shown him the “Infinite” – the “cosmic whole contained within the stone” (147). It is only in India that he can encounter the “divine enclosed within the earthly” (147).

Matteo now wishes to see the divine manifest itself in everything. To this effect, a doll appears to be a goddess, a tavern becomes a temple and the sea becomes the holy Ganga wherein he is nearly drowned. These desperate attempts of acquiring a vision of the Divine turn him into an object of ridicule and contempt amongst both his compatriots and the Indians. Finally, he is taken by Sophie to an ashram in Bihar. Not very different from the first ashram in its drabness, it is also commercial as it exploits the gullibility of the people especially the foreigners.
Nevertheless, Matteo stays on in the hope of acquiring spiritual peace by learning yoga, Sanskrit, “humility” and “penance”(83). Finally, the animosity of the *ashramites* to Sophie’s pregnancy and her hysterical threats of exposing the *ashram* authorities for having a house looted and evicted makes Matteo decide to leave. This time they arrive at another *ashram* in the north near the mountain.

What Matteo sees on arrival is a complete change from the earlier *ashrams*. While the clean, painted building as well as the scenery all around denote an air of happiness, the people exude friendliness. Two enormous tinted photographs of Swami Prem Krishna and the Mother – both “royal in their stateliness and dignity”(95) – acquaint Matteo with the *ashram*’s founders. Although the Swami is no more and the Mother is now a small, aged woman, yet, Matteo realises that he has finally reached his spiritual destination.

Listening to the Mother’s voice makes Matteo experience a unique sense of “unity” – that of the “spiritual with the physical, the dark with the light, the human with the natural”(99). This experience brings home to Matteo the sense of futility of his life prior to his meeting her.

Matteo now reaches the final stage of his spiritual quest. Becoming a devotee of the Mother, Matteo finds himself in a state of “non-being”(108) when away from her. Being initiated into the presence of an enlightened superior being like the Mother, makes Matteo view the ordinary world as a “nightmare world of physicality”(107) during which
even visiting Sophie in the hospital appears equivalent to suffering a “penance” (106).

The Mother advises Matteo to discard his books and instead open his mind. Her way of acquiring spiritual Bliss is through the “way of bhakti – the way of love” (116). At the same time, he is assigned by the Mother to write her letters.

His work leaves him with no time to either meditate or think or reflect. But it brings him into contact with the other devotees and consequently back to the centre of all these activities – the Mother. Her words to Matteo that she is “ready” while he is not further perplexes him. Matteo is still not yet fit enough to acquire spiritual enlightenment but the Mother sees in his ardent devotion her own former search for the divine “Beloved” (120) and hence, her words to Matteo.

However, when Matteo asks permission to bring Sophie to the ashram, the Mother puts Matteo’s devotion on trial by relegating him to work on the kitchen shift. But Matteo untiringly works in the kitchen through the blazing heat of the scorching summer, late into the nights. The fact that he sees very little of Sophie does not affect him but the fact that he is now no longer able to see the Mother or listen to her discourse in the evenings makes him despair.

Matteo’s arguments with Sophie at this stage, bring out the gradual transformation towards spirituality taking place within him.
Through his work, Matteo comes to realise the detachment of the self from material gains.

Sophie’s chance encounter with the Mother results in Matteo being recalled from his kitchen duties to involve himself in the publication of the Master’s books in the newly set-up ashram printing press. Inspite of being a father now, his devotion still reaches out to the Mother instead of to his wife and son. Consequently, he feels himself to be pulled in two directions and seeks the Mother’s help in resolving his great emotional “confusion”(138). The answer to this lies – so the Mother tells Matteo – in the Gita’s precept of detachment:

You are like the lotus ... roots may be in the mud but... petals are pure, the water does not touch them and the mud does not stain them. Be always like that lotus ... clean and pure”(138).

This precept of detachment is an echo from the first novel Cry, the Peacock where Gautama had sought to cultivate detachment and had preached to Maya about the pitfalls of attachment. Maya had of course, rejected all detachment while Gautama too, can never really become detached because by his own admission, he is an “egoist”² Matteo, on the other hand, can be said to have acquired – at least to a greater degree than Gautama – the state of detachment as has been preached by the Gita. Thus, in spite of being a husband and father, Matteo is not tied down by worldly attachments. His words to Sophie bring out his
understanding of the *Gita*’s precept of detachment and his practice of it to obtain a “higher way of life”(125). These words are in response to Sophie’s accusation that he would have refused outright to work as harc for his father as he did in the *ashram* for the Mother. Matteo’s words reflect the difference he has from Gautama:

... Father would make me work, so I could become self-supporting ... take over the business from him. Father would expect me to want a big salary, a car, all that junk. But the Mother ... teaches us to work without desiring the fruit. Isn’t that a higher way of life?(125)

✓ Matteo’s link with Sophie which had been slowly declining because of her persistent stubbornness to accept the change in him, now becomes even more tenuous. Sophie wants to see Matteo in the role of a father while Matteo becomes too deeply absorbed in the *ashram*’s work to have any time left for family life. Sophie continues to scoff and deride Matteo’s love for the Mother as to her the Mother is just an intriguing woman. She fails to comprehend the fact, that Matteo’s love for the Mother is sacred love and hence, much above physical love or profane love. In spite of Matteo’s best efforts, Sophie fails to differentiate between sacred and profane love. Matteo tells Sophie that he seeks “enlightenment, clarity, peace” through this sacred love for, the Mother is the medium to the Absolute. The “Absolute” being *nirguna* and *acintya*, it cannot be
conceived of by the human mind and body so, there takes place of “superior beings” like the Mother for “they provide the form within which we can see and recognise the Absolute” (143).

Matteo’s explanation to Sophie indicates the extent to which he has progressed in discovering his inner self. He has risen much higher than the ordinary physical world of Sophie. His attempts to make her realise this and endeavours to make her join him in his devotion to the Mother sadly fail. That Matteo has risen above physicality is brought out by the fact that the birth of their second child completely fails to move him and he remains expressionless and pre-occupied. Even when Sophie leaves for Europe with the children, Matteo’s concern is centred round a gradually sinking Mother for she is very sick then. Much later, when Matteo falls sick, Sophie returns to nurse him but her attempts to take him away from the ashram are stiffly rejected by Matteo. Sophie realises then that to Matteo nobody and nothing counted for they were ties left behind by him in his spiritual quest.

Matteo’s spurning of Sophie’s attempts to take him back so angers Sophie that she stubbornly challenges to show Matteo the Mother’s true nature. She therefore sets out on a backward journey to search out the Mother’s antecedents. However, during Sophie’s absence, the Mother dies leaving a disconsolate Matteo totally shattered. Like a true bhakta, Matteo decides to follow the Mother’s earlier journey to the mountains in order to receive enlightenment himself.
That Matteo has finally attained spiritual enlightenment is suggested symbolically. His son – Giacomo – claims to have encountered his father in the garden of his grandparents' house in Italy. His father appears with just a white cloth tied on him, barefoot, very thin and speaking a “foreign language”\(^{(309)}\). With his beard, he resembles, according to Giacomo, “the painting of Jesus in Church”\(^{(309)}\). This comparison with Jesus is significant for it suggests the acquirement of enlightenment by Matteo. Matteo might have had a physical death but he had acquired spiritual birth by receiving enlightenment. The fact that Jesus had risen on the third day after the crucifixion and appeared to his disciples proved his divinity. Similarly, Matteo appears – resembling Jesus in appearance – in front of his son. This is therefore suggestive of his having obtained spiritual enlightenment.

Matteo's discovery of his true self is found to progress correspondingly with the different stages of his spiritual odyssey. Firstly, as a young boy, his worldly life hardly satisfies him. He therefore becomes an alienated youth. After his realisation that spiritual life might be able to sustain him, he desperately seeks an anchor for obtaining spiritual peace. He finally leaves for India. At this stage, although he severs his ties with his family, he is still attached to Sophie.

His vision of the Cosmic Infinity takes him to his second stage. Now, his relationship with Sophie begins to be on the wane. Alienation sets in and he sets up for himself a life of penance and study.
However, the aura of true spiritual peace hardly reigns in the *ashram* that he stays in. It is instead a place of favouritism, animosity and commercialisation and hence, hardly inducive to spirituality.

His arrival at the Mother's *ashram* brings in the third stage. Here, he finally meets his spiritual guru in the mother. Family life has no serious charm for him now as he gives himself up wholly in dedication to serving the Mother by following her wishes and precepts. Although a father and a husband, he remains detached from family life. He is instead totally absorbed in sacred love or *bhakti* in order to achieve spiritual Bliss and when Sophie leaves with the children, he does not object. After his sickness which brings back Sophie to him, his link with her becomes even more tenuous. Fiercely rejecting her attempts to make him return to Italy, he tells her that he has “given”(160) himself to the Mother – to her “greatness and power”(159). Nothing on earth could change that. In other words, he knows that he is nothing other than a true *bhakta*.

With the Mother’s death, he reaches the final stage of his inner quest. Having discovered himself to be the true *bhakta* he is disconsolate at the loss of his spiritual anchor. He therefore finally sets out to seek spiritual enlightenment in the mountains thus severing forever all his earthly ties and relationships.

In Laila – who later becomes the “Divine Mother”(133) – this search for the spiritual guru resembles the mythical story of Radha’s pining for Lord Krishna.
As a small child and then a young girl, Laila detests the home of her scholarly parents, preferring to be out the whole day long. Reading and scholarship were anathema for her, and, instead, she expresses her desire to learn dancing. To take her away from the streets, her parents tempt her to study in Cairo and from there on to Paris.

In Cairo, Laila secretly attends Koran classes where she finds a doctrine that “did not allow questioning, that was powerful and authoritative in a strange and inexplicable way” (170). This pleases and puzzles her simultaneously. She even goes to secret revolutionary meetings and attends the celebration on the streets during Ramadan. Thus, this is Laila’s first stage in the journey of her inner quest – her moorless floundering in search of an anchor to provide her with stability and peace. Whether this stability is spiritual or not, Laila at this stage, does not yet know.

The next stage of her journey takes her to Paris where the opulence of her aunt’s house makes Laila feel suffocated. Like Matteo later does, so also, Laila gives up meat insisting only on bread. As her close proximity with her aunt’s family brings in constant friction, Laila seeks to avoid this by keeping herself out of the house. She now takes up dancing and for some months believes that she was finally doing what she wished to do most. However, she soon tires of it as according to her, the music lacked “emotion” (189). As these dancing lessons fail to fulfil her, she continues to wander about the streets till one day the sight – in an
“Orientalist” and more specifically an “Indological” bookshop – of a metallic statue in a dancer’s pose catches her attention. This bookshop becomes her constant haunt now.

The sight one day of a poster with two figures “one indigo blue, the other a pale gold” with the caption Krishna Lila catches at Laila, “with a snare so sharp” that she almost cries out. The words “together and separately ... seemed to point a finger at her ...” till “recognition” strikes her and she is “confronted by her true self”(199). In the word “Lila” she discovers her inner self. She, Laila, is in actuality “Lila” looking for her Krishna: “Laila, Lila... Krishna Krishna. Krishna Lila”(199).

To this effect, she contrives to join Krishna and his dancing troupe in Venice. To Laila –at this stage – the dancer, Krishna’s face, seems to resemble the face of Lord Krishna that she had seen in the mainiature painting in the bookshop. This makes her “intensely and passionately” want to have access to Krishna’s “whole world”(208). The dance of Radha and Krishna with their “final rite of union” appears to Laila to be the union of the “worshipped and the worshipper, the god and the devotee”(202). Thus, it becomes her ardent desire now to be able to learn and dance this dance, more so when she learns that in India, the teacher teaching dance is also a “spiritual teacher”(211).

Learning dance under Krishna’s tutelage, Laila at last feels that she is doing what she was “meant” to do, “called upon” to do and “come” to do(222). This is the next stage in her journey for inner
discovery. An innocent Laila mistakes Krishna's lust and use of her for spiritual love and hence, at this stage, Krishna becomes for her both "country and religion" – the male physical dancer was also the "god" of the books that she had studied (227).

These feelings undergo a slow change when the dancing troupe arrives in America. Bereft of an indulgent patron – unlike in Venice – Krishna begins to show his true colours. He now indulges in pure commercialisation of art till Laila slowly comprehends that his dances had "nothing to do with any religious belief or spiritual exercise, Indian or otherwise" (255). Her growing disillusionment plagues her with sleepless nights. This is another step forward in her spiritual journey when she realises now the limitations and inadequacies of earthly love.

Her disillusionment makes her desert the troupe half-way through the tour. However, when the troupe's return to India is arranged Laila goes with Krishna in the hope of meeting the "great light" (284). But in India, the mask is finally removed from Krishna's face and Laila sees him for what he is – "an evil joker" devoted to "worldly success, to financial gain, to fame..." (286). Her vision of the idol in a temple sorely upsets her with the realisation that her search is not yet over. Pining for a vision of her true Lord, Laila falls sick yet she continues to believe in finding a spiritual anchor somewhere who will "open up... the Cosmic Infinity" enabling her to search for "Eternal knowledge and the Supreme light" (290).
It is in great despair that she cries for forgiveness for having mistaken – in her ignorance – "what is only human for what is Supreme and Almighty"(290). She also prays fervently for a vision of the "truth" and the "Supreme Being" in order to achieve "harmony with the Spirit"(290).

Finally, Laila makes her journey to an ashram in the Himalayas. This journey marks the culmination of her inner journey. At a small station, Laila comes upon a Sage meditating under the "holy" banyan tree. As she continues to gaze upon the Sage’s "serene visage", there stirs within her the "great desire" – present since childhood – to "escape into ... a better ... brighter"(296) world. This time finally, she has a vision of the "Eternal Light":

... the great banyan tree burst into light ... it was transformed into an earthly sun and fire revolved through it ... I was on fire, the tree was on fire, light blazed and the whole sky was illuminated (296).

With this vision to sustain her, Laila makes her way to the ashram nestled in the mountain and climbs the mountain confident in the knowledge of meeting her "Master"(298). Reaching the peak at twilight, she kneels and prays knowing that "it was the hour of my fate". The silence is suddenly broken by the piercing cry of an eagle launching itself into flight. With it Laila’s soul too “set out in quest”. The appearance of the evening star appears to be an “augury” and knowing her time to have
come, Laila begins to dance in "ecstasy" – the "dance of the milkmaid/Pining for the Shepherd" (298).

Finally, she has a vision of her Divine Master and when she bows to him in devotion, he pronounces her to be:

Shakti ... / Supreme Power / Thou art Durga, /

Mother of us all ... / The Divine force ... (299).

With this blessing comes heavenly light and music and Laila finally receives Spiritual Enlightenment.

Early the next morning, Laila makes her way to the temple by the river. Therein she meets the "Great Sage" whose words of "Divine Love" fill her "every limb with its nectar" and she becomes "Radha who beheld, at last, the true Krishna" (300). Laila therefore continues to stay the whole day in the courtyard and at night is given a room within the ashram. She weeps with both joy and sorrow at having found but also having become separated from her Master. In the ensuing storm, the "Great Sage" finally takes a weeping Laila with him into the ashram. That Laila has finally reached her destination is shown symbolically when the lashing rains miraculously stop and there is "utter peace" (302). Laila starts to reside in the ashram with the Sage as "His true Devotee and Lover" (302). At the same time, the Master asks the devotees to "worship her as the Divine Mother" as she is now a "manifestation of the Divine" who has come to bring enlightenment and through it Spiritual Bliss (133). As the Master slowly retires into meditation, the Mother starts to take his place in
the ashram. As the Master and the Mother become one spiritually, it is through their love for her that the devotees can hope to reach the Master.

Thus, Laila’s quest ends when she receives Enlightenment and in the Master finds the earthly manifestation of her Divine Lord. She no longer remains “Laila” but becomes the Divine Mother. In fact, the Master and the Mother are the “two aspects of one divinity” (136).

In conclusion, Laila too, from her childhood seeks a higher way of life from her mundane one. Whereas Matteo had been repelled by the materialistic opulence of his parents’ home, Laila is repelled by the scholarly atmosphere of her home. Both are not attached to their families. Both relate India to spirituality and hence, their coming to India.

Unlike Matteo who has known “ordinary, physical, mortal love” (137) in his relationship with Sophie, Laila’s love for the dancer Krishna is not based on physical love although she does mistake his lustful adoration for spiritual love. To Laila, her love for the dancer is more a representation of her love for the divine Lord Krishna. She of course, soon realises that this is only a delusion. Both Matteo and Laila realise that sacred love or divine love is superior to profane or mortal love. The love which Laila has for the Master is sacred love. Similarly, Matteo’s love for the Mother too, is sacred love.

Different stages mark their progress in their search for their inner selves in their journey to India. Both believe in “signs” (290) to lead and guide them on their journey. Both receive visions of the “cosmic
infinity" and "Divine Light". However, whereas Laila receives Enlightenment first and then encounters the earthly manifestation of the Divine Lord in the Great Sage and is ordained by him to be the Mother, Matteo's search leads him first to the Mother who becomes the "form" (143) through which he can hope to recognize the Absolute. Again, it is on her death that he traces her footsteps to the mountains to acquire Enlightenment.

Finally, the picture that emerges of Laila and Matteo is that of two acutely sensitive individuals who seek a higher way of life as a way out of the ordinary world of materialistic mire. Since this world fails to satisfy them, they wish to transcend it. Their attempts to seek out their inner selves become an attempt at establishing an independent individual identity through a mystical way.

Initially, Sophie is not interested in making any search for discovering her true self. Practical and down-to-earth, she knows herself to be the mother of her two children and the wife of Matteo. Matteo's obsession for spirituality and his devotion to the Mother highly infuriates her, for, to her the Mother is only a paradoxical figure - "mythical" as well as an "aged solitary woman with sparse hair and a faded nightdress" (130). When her best efforts to wean away Matteo from the Mother's "spell" (130) fail, she takes it as a challenge to prove to Matteo what the Mother really is and sets out to trace her antecedents. The reading of the Mother's personal diary gives her an insight into the spiritual love
which both the Mother and Matteo possess. When she finds that Matteo has departed to the mountains, she decides to follow him. Matteo by his humble and ascetic life had set high moral standards for her - in fact, she proclaims him to be like a “god” (155). This is suggestive of the fact that her search for Matteo might resemble Laila’s search for the Master. In trying to search out Matteo, Sophie might yet try to search out her true inner self too.

This fact is further substantiated by Sophie’s recollection of the first pilgrimage undertaken by Matteo and herself. Then, a young mother had carried a sickly child who had died. A fellow pilgrim’s answer to her question of why they had come - “if you have nothing else, you must have faith in God” (55) - had filled her with anger and scorn. The realization of why people go on pilgrimages now overcomes her and hence, her decision to seek out and follow Mateo. In other words, having had an understanding of the bhakta’s true love and devotion in his search for God, and then finding Matteo lost to her forever, Sophie too, finds her life totally “dead” and devoid of hope. In order to acquire meaning for her life, she would also have to become a true bhakta.

Like the previous novels, once again, Anita Desai has made use of the omniscient narrator who aims to project the thought-processes of the characters. However, Laila obtaining spiritual enlightenment is narrated in the first person in the form of her diary. This has resemblance to Monisha’s diary in *Voices in the City*. This technique of adopting the
first-person narrative has been taken recourse to in order to make Laila’s experience more convincing to Sophie who has always been skeptical about the Mother’s halo of spirituality. Laila putting down her experience in her diary enables Sophie to get a first-hand account of the experience.

The other significant aspect of the narrative technique is the use of dialogue between Sophie and Matteo in their arguments for and against the Mother’s influence and the concept of sacred love. Again, this has been undertaken to create the impression of direct participation of the reader in their thoughts. Thus, to make the arguments forceful, their own perspectives are shown to be presented in their own voices and not in the narrator’s voice.

Apart from the thought-processes which reveal certain aspects of the characters, the narrator’s voice is also used to delineate character. For instance, Sophie’s tumultuous emotion on leaving behind the ashram and Matteo is narrated thus:

... Sophie could not sleep for ... the hate she felt for the world outside. Matteo had spoilt it for her ... the standards he had set ... had become the standards by which she would find herself judging all that followed in her life ... (150).

Character specially Laila’s or the Mother’s is also delineated from the points-of-view of the other characters. Thus for Sophie, the
Mother was a “monster spider who had spun this web to catch these silly flies” (127). For Matteo however, the Mother is a “superior being”. (143;

‘Anita Desai has used time in a very fluid manner here. The novel has a Prologue and an Epilogue with four chapters in between. While the first two chapters centre around Matteo, the other two centre around Laila or the Mother.

The locale for the Prologue is both India and Italy and is in the present. However, through Isabel’s questioning about her father, Matteo, the past of Matteo is recreated – his childhood, youth, marriage and departure to India.

Chapter I too, begins in the present in India. Sophie and Matteo’s conversation takes the narrative to the past wherein is shown their first arrival in India and their wanderings and encounters till the arrival at the Mother’s ashram.

Similarly, Chapter II begins in the present wherein the conversation of Matteo and Sophie continues. Their talk about the Mother takes the narrative to the past – to their life in the ashram, their growing estrangement, the birth of Giacomo and Isabel, Sophie’s return to Italy and back again to India to see the sick Matteo.

Chapter III once again, begins in the present. Sophie’s last conversation with Matteo and her overwhelming desire to discover the Mother’s antecedents occur in the present. However, her journey to Cairo in the present takes the narrative to Laila’s past. Again, Laila’s journey to
Paris in the past is followed by Sophie's journey to Paris in the present. This is followed by Laila's life in Paris in the past. The present and the past are connected through images in this chapter. For instance, the pigeons who from "a feathery curtain" (180) around the girl near Sophie in the present in Paris is followed immediately by the curtained room of Laila's aunt's house in the past. Similarly, the image of the pigeons swooping down on a bread-chewing Laila in the past brings the narrative to the present when Sophie too, watches the flying pigeons reveal a girl dusting away crumbs in the present.

Sophie's journey to Venice in the present is followed by Laila's journey in the past. Similarly, Sophie's interview with the Signora's daughter in Venice and her arrival in America takes the narrative to the past which shows Laila's disillusionment in New York and the final journey to India.

This constant shifting of the narrative between the present and the past makes Sophie's tracing of the Mother's antecedents to be convincing. What is shown is not a chronological sequence in linear time but a set of pictures fluctuating between the past and the present.

Chapter IV is again in the present with Sophie meeting Krishna in Bombay and the acquiring of Laila's diary. The narrative continues in the present with Sophie's journey back to the ashram coinciding with the reading of the diary.
The locale of the Epilogue in once again divided between India and Italy.

The novel has a symbolic structure. Although outwardly, it involves a journey – Laila's journey from Egypt through Paris, Venice, America to India, Matteo's journey from Italy to India – on the symbolic level also it depicts a symbolic spiritual journey for the characters. This journey takes the characters – Matteo and Laila – from one state of being to another – from the state of physicality to that of spirituality. This is reflected through the use of the Radha-Krishna myth. This Radha-Krishna motif is used to portray the experience and relationship between Laila and the Sage. Laila's longing for her union with Krishna symbolizes her longing for the Absolute. Her pining for the true Krishna symbolizes Radha's pining for Lord Krishna. Matteo's longing for the Mother is the Radha-Krishna motif in reverse where Matteo's search for the Absolute in the Mother reflects Laila's own search.

Apart from having a symbolic structure, the novel abounds in symbols which bring out the experiences of the characters. C. P. Cavafy's poem *Ithaca* which is the epigraph of this novel is suggestive of the theme itself. In Greek mythology, Ithaca is one of the loveliest islands in Greece but one which played no part in classical Greek history. According to Homer, it was the island kingdom of Odysseus. Cavafy's "Ithaca" appears to be not just the name of a place nor a destination. It appears to be suggestive of a name for a condition or state of being to
which one arrives after a long journey garnering varied experiences on the way. Similarly, the protagonists Laila and Matteo journey to reach their own Ithacas.

The following verse from Cavafy's poem — appearing as the epigraph in this novel — is symbolic of the journey undertaken by Matteo and Laila:

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to let it last for long years;
and even to anchor at the isle when you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches (p IX).

For Matteo and Laila, their 'Ithaca' is the finding of spiritual knowledge, peace and love. Whatever their varied experiences, their ultimate aspiration for that state of spirituality rules their minds. Ultimately both are successful in achieving that state of being. For Sophie, the journey is however, about to begin.

As has already been mentioned, Matteo's love for the Mother and the Mother's love for the Master symbolise sacred or spiritual love while Sophie's love for Matteo is symbolic of the profane love of the ordinary human being.
The so-called "saints" to which Sophie and Matteo are first taken are symbolic of the exploitation of the gullibility of the masses especially of the foreigners. Similarly, the first two *ashrams* are symbolic of the commercialisation of religion and spirituality. For instance, Matteo's offering of fruits is "clearly despicable"(75) in comparison to the other gifts like Wills Goldflake cigarettes, a gold-plated lighter and currency. A note of irony can be detected in this juxtaposition. These gifts are clearly material objects hardly conducive for spiritual growth while Matteo's gift of fruits is more appropriate. It is ironical that Matteo in his search for spirituality fails to realise this then. However, they very appropriately indicate the unsuitability of that *ashram* for the search for true spirituality.

After Matteo's cosmic vision during their journey to the second *ashram*, Matteo feels himself to have gone blind when the lights are put out at night. His feelings of physical blindness are symbolic of his frantic blind search for a spiritual anchor. Similarly, his insistence on bread and water during his early days suggests the beginning of his spiritual journey. Laila's insistence on vegetarianism is also suggestive of her yearning to rise above the physical pleasures of life. Matteo's act of running continuously for hours as a young boy is also suggestive of his desire to escape the materialistic world.

During their stay at the second *ashram*, Sophie amuses herself by visiting the municipal park and is drawn to linger by a black
leopard. This attraction of Sophie for and her sense of affinity with the black leopard is symbolic of her attachment to the vitality, the energy as well as the animal aspects of life as against Matteo who now comes to symbolise the moral and spiritual aspects of life.

Like Sophie, Laila too encounters a caged black panther. However, unlike Sophie – who has no control over the animal – Laila’s presence mesmerises the panther:

When Laila moved, the panther ... moved ... kept pace ... docile and calm ... She turned and walked back, it too turned ... and walked ... They ambulated together, panther and girl, keeping pace, sending out messages of mutual admiration ... (192).

This is symbolic of Laila’s extraordinary power that was later to turn her with her acquiring of spirituality into “a manifestation of the Divine”(133).

That the “rigours of a life of devotion” would mean the enclosing of oneself into a severely grim “hermetic and ascetic” state is symbolically shown by the life of the old sage who spends his life in meditation in an underground cell of three feet by three feet.

The use of imagery here is less profuse in comparison to some of the earlier novels. Like In Custody and Baumgartner’s Bombay, this novel too, has more of external action than the earlier novels like Cry, the Peacock and Fire on the Mountain which perhaps has resulted in
sparse imagery. Even then, there has been the use of certain significant images in the novel. A recurrent image in Anita Desai's novels suggesting mental and emotional captivity is that of the caged animals. This image has already been mentioned in *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*. Here, in this novel too, the caged animals of the park suggest Sophie's sense of captivity in the constricted life of the second ashram.

Matteo's attraction for the Mother and Sophie's loathing of her is brought out by the use of bird imagery. Sophie, one day, suddenly comes across the Mother watching a flock of peacocks:

... the males ... dipped and turned before the Mother; displaying their glories ... The smaller, drab peahens... scurried around awkwardly. The males paid them no attention: their eyes ... all seemed trained upon the Mother (128).

The drab peahen is suggestive of Sophie while the male peacock offering a "tribute ... for long minutes"(128) only to the Mother while ignoring the peahens is suggestive of Matteo who too neglects Sophie in his ardent devotion for the Mother.

As the peacocks fly off, one remains. It was "the largest one, with a dazzling feather fall of blue and gold"(129). This lone peacock who remains behind is again suggestive of Matteo for he too, never wavers in his devotion. This suggestion of the peacock image with Matteo is further substantiated when the Mother after meeting Sophie in her encounter with
the peacocks, recalls Matteo from menial duties in the kitchen and installs him in the printing press.

The other bird image of significance is in Laila’s encounter with the pigeons in Paris. Laila had refused to go to church with her aunt’s family. On coming out, they see her sprawled out on a bench enjoying a croissant. However, the entire flock of pigeons inhabiting the square swoop down on her, covering her with their “pecking beaks and grasping pink claws” (215). This is suggestive of her aunt’s family swooping down on her with their restrictions and rules.

This image has a precedent in In Custody where Nur too, is covered by swooping pigeons. Unlike an exasperated Laila who throws away the half-eaten croissant to ward off the swooping pigeons, Nur makes no effort to ward them off. Thus, while Laila’s action symbolises her defiant refusal to accept the rules and restrictions of her aunt’s family, Nur’s action denotes his – as has already been mentioned – unwillingness to remove himself from his loutish companions. This image here in this novel, can be considered to be a variant of the earlier predator-prey images. Only here, it is the rules and regulations of genteel society that try to inhibit an individual’s mental and emotional growth.

Again, the city birds in Voices in the City had formed a “thick dark screen” over the “flailing horse”3. Here, in contrast, the pigeons form a “shifting screen, a feathery curtain” (180) around the girl near Sophie. While in the first image, the horse had been destroyed, here it
is used to link the curtains – in the past – of the house of Laila’s aun:. Significantly, these curtains shut out “the street and light”(180). Hence, they denote an image of restriction.

The surroundings of the second ashram are portrayed with images that bring out the drabness:

... dark, drab buildings ... littered with debris ...

streaked and faded walls, dust-coated windows,

shadeless light bulbs ...(74).

These external drab images suggest the equally drab and dark minds of the ashramites. In contrast, the bright and cheerful atmosphere of the Mother’s ashram is suggestive of the prevailing peace and love within the ashram:

... freshly white washed ... groves of ... flower ...

orchards bearing fragrant fruit; bougainvillea gushed up ... pink, orange, yellow, crimson and lilac.

Birds called ... (94).

Sophie’s comparison of Matteo with the image of ‘god’(155) lends credence to his later apparition as Jesus to his son. Both these images are indicative of Matteo having obtained Enlightenment.

There are a few instances of insect and reptilian imagery. For instance, after Sophie’s arrival with the children to Matteo’s home, she no longer remains the “passionately” guarding “lioness” that she had
been at the ashram but is like a “torpid, motionless lizard on a ledge” (153).

The night after her admission in the Mission Hospital and Matteo’s entry into the Mother’s ashram, Sophie suffers a nightmare:

... suddenly the baby came slithering out of her ... It lay there in coils, its head buried within. As she touched it and tried to unwrap it, she found it was a snake, cold and limp ... (92).

This coil that turns out to be a snake, making her withdraw in horror is indicative of her later horror at the way Matteo’s life becomes enmeshed in the Mother’s, ignoring the baby and her.

Anita Desai has made use of the Radha-Krishna myth here as another fictional device to depict the relationship of Laila with the Sage. The conscious use of myth as a literary technique was part of the modernist trend – the method of T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land and of James Joyce in Ulysses. These writers turned to the classical, pagan and Christian myths as areas of reference in their works. This concern with myth as a literary technique is also reflected in the Indian novel in English in works such as B. Rajan’s The Dark Dancer, Kamala Markandeya’s Some Inner Fury, Sudhin Ghose’s The Flame of the Forest and Raja Rao’s The Serpent and the Rope. While the first two novels have Sita as the archetype of Indian womanhood in all her suffering and sacrifice, the latter two novels have the Radha-Krishna motif.
It is worth noting that Anita Desai has for the first time dealt with mysticism and spirituality in this novel. Earlier, Anita Desai had been concerned with the inner world, now she has combined it with the world of the spirit.

Earlier, Anita Desai in her short story *Scholar and Gypsy*, had also dealt with an American couple who had come to India. Here it is David – the husband writing his thesis – who returns back while his wife Pat, joins the hippies after experiencing “a kind of ‘nirvana’, a spiritual elevation”\(^4\). However, apart from this resemblance, the short story does not possess any other similarity with this novel. Neither does it deal with spirituality or mysticism as has been done in this novel.

Notes

