CHAPTER IV

THE JOURNEY

TO ITHACA
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Anita Desai's novel *Journey to Ithaca* is a tale of many journeys, and takes the readers to Italy, India, Egypt and the United States. Anita Desai brilliantly evokes spiritual India in all its endless complexity and examines the nature of pilgrimage through the aspirations and adventures of three superbly realized characters. "A splendidly nuanced evocation, never credulous or dismissive of those impelled to go on pilgrimage."  

Richard Bernstein says, "As always, Ms. Desai writes with intelligence and power. She has a remarkable eye for substance, the things that give life its texture. Nothing escapes her power of observation. The book is wise and observant yet overwrought, edging into grandiloquence and improbability, the emotional drama artificially thickened by images and metaphors that are inflated and not especially fresh."  

Journey to Ithaca described by some overseas critics as Desai's most powerful work to date, is more about banishment than about a journey. It examines at close quarters how foreigners especially from the West react to India in different ways.

140 Kirkus Review.

"An extraordinarily rich and satisfying novel about three westerners in search of spiritual enlightenment in India. In its compassionate portrayal of these three people struggling to find a spiritual home for themselves. Journey to Ithaca examines the nature of quests and shows us spiritual India in all its endless complexity."142

The main travellers are Matteo and Sophie. Matteo, the bored son of a rich Italian family travels to the East, to India, on a spiritual quest. Sophie, his German wife, goes along with her husband, ends up following him from one guru to the next, from one ashram to the next, but is never captivated by the 'spirituality' she sees in these places. Finally, they travel to an ashram in India where Matteo falls under the influence of a guru known only as the Mother. When Matteo settles down at the foot of the Mother, Sophie decides to uncover the background of this Mother. Sophie is resentful of her hold over Matteo and tries to find out the truth about where the Mother came from and who she really is. This necessitates that Sophie retraces - backwards - the circumstances that brought the Egyptian girl Laila to India and made this dancer, the holy Mother. The relationship between the two is threatened until, chastened by their experiences, they remember why they came to India in the first place—to acquire wisdom.

142 Editorial Reviews.
The first part of the book is devoted to the early life of Matteo in Italy, his meeting and marrying Sophie, their travelling together to India. It was the summer of 1975, Sophie and Matteo, were dressed in identical blue jeans and T-shirts and sports shoes, carrying identical rucksacks on their backs, as did so many of their generation in Europe. Only Sophie still wore her hair very short and Matteo was growing his long.

Matteo, raised in the luscious countryside around Lake Como is restless since childhood. Matteo was a dissatisfied youth who engaged in destructive behaviour until his tutor gave him Hermann Hesse's *The Journey to the East*. It opens in him a desperate longing. But Sophie felt if it were not for that book, he would not have thought of going to India or of following the gurus. Before coming to India, Matteo's life has been empty. He has an idealistic view of what this mysterious land can offer, thinking of superficial and fragmentary impressions rather than the whole. Sophie is willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. They join the 1970s flight of young Europeans to India. They left on foot.

The immensity of the country—its beauty and its filth, its holy men and its begging children—initially overwhelms them. And they discover that their reasons for going differ. Sophie is a hedonist, looking to apprehend reality through the senses, "I want to go to Goa and eat shrimp. I want to go to Kashmir and live on a houseboat." Matteo is disgusted, "That
isn't India" (p. 47). So Sophie increases her intake of marijuana and tamely follows her husband from swami to swami. Imbued with a vision of enlightenment, Matteo drags Sophie with him to one ashram, one holy man and one pilgrimage after the other. Matteo is impressed by all that he sees. Pragmatic Sophie is horrified and disillusioned by the poverty and hardships they encounter. Matteo, a dreamer, sees only the purity of ascetic life. One never understands how Matteo ticks, why he is ready to accept anyone and everyone as his saviour, why he accepts that living in filth is essential to spiritual quest. From the beginning it had been as though there were a design, a pattern to their wanderings. Finally Matteo and Sophie end up in Bombay.

In India, together they visit swamis, gurus, ashrams -- always searching. An already converted Frenchman, Pierre Eduard and one of his erstwhile Indian friends lead the two from one guru to the next. Pierre Eduard says, "When will people from the West free themselves from Hollywood? Can you think of nothing that is not concrete, material, an entertainment?" (p. 36). Yet the first saint he takes Sophie and Matteo to visit is an entertainer, using "magic tricks" to entice her audience to praise the God. He took them to see a saint who lived in a suburb at the other end of Bombay. There, in a surprisingly large room sat an elderly woman in a purple cotton sari with a green border. She was surrounded by a throng of men and women all seated crosslegged and they
were all silent. In some embarrassment, Sophie and Matteo lowered themselves to the floor, keeping close to the wall at the back so that they could lean against it, not having much confidence in their ability to sit cross-legged for long.

After sometime the woman lifted her arms and rubbed her palms. With that magic trick, she had produced flowers whose odour filled the room. All cried ‘Miraculous!’ Sophie was disappointed and thought that they had come only to see a performance of magic tricks. Pierre Eduard tried to convince her by saying that she did it all for-the-glory-of-God. Eduard claims that it is a form of worship, "for the glory of God!" (p. 40). Sophie remains the skeptic, but Matteo is fascinated. He follows Mr. Pandey from mystic to saint, from saint to yogis, from yogis to ascetics, from ascetics to gurus. Yet his life in the established ashrams does not fill what he had thought it would.

Sophie protested, “I have seen tricks like that at parties and magic shows” (p. 40). He said he would take them to another swami. He said, “Our country is full of such people who have found enlightenment. I will take you to see others if you like” (p. 41). Sophie is skeptical of these 'party tricks'. She reflected, “This whole country was populated with devotees; the gods could not have enough; now they recruited them from abroad as well” (p. 44).

In another town he visited a yogi who had not slept for twenty five years. He collected the notes and coins scattered
on the deer skin given by the pilgrims. When he did so Matteo noticed the glint of a gold watch strap on his wrist. He wondered, “Why did the yogi who did not need sleep need a watch to tell him the time?”(p. 65). In another small town the police had caught a yogi who walked about naked. The next morning Matteo saw the people who had been laughing and mocking him, followed him with devoutness. They called that ill-fed and undressed man “Sky-clad baba” (p. 66). Matteo failed to see how that made him, amongst all the others who were also ill-fed and barely clad, a saint.

Like many other Europeans in the 60s and 70s, both these young people end up on the beaches of Goa, and live for many months amidst clouds of drugs. Chandra in his review says, “They lose each other, find each other again and finally leave Goa for yet another ashram, on yet another quest.”143 He had begun to feel that if he could not have a vision of spiritual truth then he could not continue to live there.

Matteo was in a trance. He was lying prostrate on the floor among the feet of the drinking customers thinking that it is a temple. Sophie felt no pity for him. She merely found him

ridiculous, an insect that had become disoriented and lost its bearings.

Paul Gray questions, “Can there be anything more tiresome than hearing--or reading--about someone else's quest for spiritual enlightenment? Such accounts always tend toward the deeply sincere and the totally humorless. Anita Desai is therefore an intrepid novelist indeed.”

Before coming to India, Matteo's life has been empty. Sophie and Matteo, in search of a spiritual dimension to their conventional middle-class lives, travel to ashrams in India. Matteo continues his journey as he believes in the Aitreya Brahmanan of the Rig Veda which says,

There is no happiness for he who does not travel, Rohita!

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! (p. 196).  

He has an idealistic view of what this mysterious land can offer, thinking of superficial and fragmentary impressions rather than the whole.

One day in a grove of banyan he saw an old man going towards a banyan tree. He sprinkled water and flowers on the stone, lodged in the tree trunk. Matteo went there and stared at it. At first it seemed nothing but a smooth, round stone. Then as he continued to gaze at it, then he saw that “what was perfectly balanced there in a cleft in the tree was not a stone at all but a circle and it contained within it another circle and another; that there was no beginning and no end to them; they were infinite; they were infinity. That circle was the universe itself, containing world within world, ring upon ring, sphere within sphere and to his dazzled eyes they revolved within each other and yet remained perfectly static, maintaining a total balance and harmony that could only be divine” (p. 68). The stone glowed now, became brilliant in Matteo’s eyes, refulgent with what was, he felt certain, divine light. Later while describing his experience to Sophie he said, “No, not the stone at all—but the cosmic whole contained within the stone. It was only in India that a stone could have shown me

the Infinite...where one sees the divine enclosed within the earthly” (p. 147).

After perceiving the entire universe in a small stone, Matteo suffers something of a nervous breakdown. He fell upon his knees before sellers, beggars and a lamp-post saying that “the divine manifests itself in everything and everybody.” The doctor who treated him asked him to study books to know about India. He said, “You think you can understand it without any study, that Divine light is like a flash of lightning” (p. 71). Then they went to Bihar to see another swamiji. Sophie lost all belief in these gurus and kept out of the ashrams as much as she could. Yet she accompanied him as they had come to India together, to share an adventure. They would go through it together, stay together, recover their unique and essential love.

Looking for a cure, he fetches up at an ashram in the foothills of the Himalayas, run by an elderly woman known to her devotees as the Mother. Then he arrives at the Mother’s ashram called as ‘the Abode of Bliss’ and feels at one with his surroundings—he has finally found a structure that makes sense to him. And when they meet the holy woman known as the Mother, Matteo is convinced that he has found what he was searching for all those years. The previous ashrams focused on study of the ancient texts and meditation. The Mother tells him all that will be required of him is to be happy and to work for the good of the ashram. When he asks
her what he should be studying, she replies, "Read nothing. Nothing. You have not come to a university. I am not giving out degrees. . . . Will you take this degree and go out to show it to the world? Please, I beg you, close your books. Clear your mind. The way of jnana—the way of knowledge—is nothing compared to the way of bhakti—the way of love. Here we teach only Love" (p. 116-117).

The Mother's theory ignores the philosophical search for Truth. Hinduism and Buddhism both teach that a state of enlightenment can be attained only through concentration, through meditation on the words of the Divine. The Mother only requires her devotees to be—to live in bliss—but does not require of them the avenue to find that state. "We know the Divine Force is everywhere," she tells the faithful. "Bliss! Bliss now, bliss here, forever bliss" (p. 103). This is what Matteo has been waiting to hear. Sophie, now pregnant, is skeptical, but she moves in and bears the first of her two children.

Matteo becomes a fervent devotee of the aged, solitary guru, "the Mother." But to his skeptical German wife the Mother is not a fount of Eastern wisdom but a "monster spider" who catches "silly flies" like the deluded Matteo. His personal search leads him away from Sophie and toward the Mother, a charismatic guru. For a change, this place is clean. Almost beautiful. Everybody works hard. They grow vegetables, fruits, flowers. Matteo is happy to do whatever
the Mother asks of him. Sophie joins him later as she was sick and in a hospital when they arrive at the town where the ashram is situated. She is sceptical from the beginning of the Mother. Pragmatic Sophie is horrified by the realities of life and disillusioned by the poverty and hardships they encounter. Matteo, a dreamer, sees only the purity of ascetic life. She does not make any attempt to meet the Mother. But a meeting between the two is inevitable. The realities of life in the ashram magnify the lovers' differences. Eventually his personal search leads him away from Sophie and toward the Mother, a charismatic guru.

Sophie hates and fears India. On the mundane level, Sophie cannot deal with Indian customs. In the communal baths she marvels at how the Indian women “all bathed under the taps in their saris, then somehow managed to remove the wet clothes from under the dry ones, with no flash of nudity in between.” When Sophie attempts the same maneuvers, she is mocked. Was it for this that they had come to India?

When Matteo finally reaches the point of his most complete attachment, as a disciple of the Mother, Sophie's disdain reaches its apex. She asks him, “Must we believe everything without any questioning? Are you afraid my questions will expose her?” (p. 108). He refuses to answer. For him ‘any time spent away from the Mother, without her, was wasted time, empty time, dead time’. She remains with Matteo at the Mother's ashram for a few years, but she is
miserable. She gives birth to a son and a daughter, both of whom she raises in the ashram. After giving birth to the son Giacomo - refusing to let him be named Prem Krishna by the Mother. The tensions between Matteo and Sophie are apparent to everyone. The ashram watches, “in silence, to see who would win.” They had witnessed such battles before:

Matteo, in exasperation, says to his wife, “Sophie, you are a destroyer. You will destroy me.

Sophie: I’m trying to save you. Take you away and save you.

Matteo: The Mother’s love sustains the valuable part. That’s the difference between sacred and profane love. Sophie, Sophie, will you believe only what you see?” She returns, “What do you find so hateful that you must become someone else?” (p. 142)

Worn by their battles through the night and by the demanding work of the day, both were gaunt and exhausted. The arguments were turning into silences and the silences were stretching and deepening. This time, after Sophie gives birth to her second child, Isabel, the divisions between them are too stark. Sophie throws Matteo’s words in his face, “The Absolute, the Soul, the Supreme. Supra this and supra that. I am sick of them. They are non-words.” Matteo responds, “And what words do you like? Food. Bed. Baby. House. Are those your words?” “Yes. Yes!” she responds. “They are good words and I like them” (p. 143).
Matteo is looking for the ultimate religious experience, one in which a guide, a god or anyone who claims the authority will answer all his questions. Conversely, Sophie is looking to find what she needs on the physical plane, within herself and from her family. She wants Matteo to be an active participant in their marriage, not merely a rare presence in their domicile. She needs to understand how the Mother has enchanted him, but for Sophie this necessitates a search into the Mother's humanness rather than her reincarnation as the Master's consort. Sophie asks:

"What is she anyway? . . . Looks Indian, sounds Indian, but not Indian. Well, what is she then? . . . Ah, so-she was born, or re-born, the Mother of the ashram, and that's all there is to it, is it? . . . But what if I told you what I've heard? What if I tell you she was once a dancer, that she first came to India with a dance troupe. The dance tour went to pieces-I suppose the manager ran off with the money instead of booking halls or printing posters, isn't that what they always do? So then there she was, on the lonesome, looking for a rich somebody to pick her up-" (p. 131).

In an effort to reclaim Matteo, Sophie embarks on her own journey for the truth about the Mother's mysterious past. Sophie, convinced that the only way to rescue Matteo from the 'clutches' of the Mother, retraces the journey the Mother had undertaken till she became the Mother. Sophie flees with her children to her in-laws' Italian villa. After leaving the
children with their grandparents she begins a journey of her own. She discovers that the outside world is as much a prison as the ashram. Then she makes it her mission to track down the facts of the Mother's life, in order to expose her as a fraud, thereby regaining her husband.

Years pass, and Sophie eventually takes her son and daughter back to Europe to be educated. But when she learns that Matteo is ill, she returns to India and decides to investigate the past life of the Mother. "I will make a connection between what you believe and what I know," she tells her husband. Vowing to unmask the Mother's true identity, she then sets off to Alexandria. There, through flashbacks, we meet Laila, a free-spirited teenager, half-Egyptian, half-French, who moves to Paris, rebels against her bourgeois aunt and joins an Indian dance troupe. Falling in love with Krishna, the troupe's charismatic, aloof leader, Laila tours Venice and 1920s New York before moving with him to India, where she later renounces dance for enlightenment and transforms herself into the Mother. The story closes with excerpts from Laila's India diary and with Sophie's confrontation with the wizened, aged Krishna, whom she tracks down in Bombay. Jyotsna Sanzgiri says, "Desai magically evokes the collision and melding of cultures and
ideas as she maps the hazards and rewards of spiritual quest.”

Having been born as Laila, the only daughter of a French mother and an Egyptian father, Laila was a rebel from her childhood. Her parents send her off to Paris where she lives with her aunt and her family. Laila never gets adjusted to the 'civilised' way of life of her aunt, and takes pleasure in living like a barbarian amidst all such civilization. She is also searching for some meaning to her life, and ends up meeting a dancing troupe from India. She manages to convince Krishna, the leader of the troupe to accept her as a member. They all end up in Venice, where they live as guests of a nice Italian signorina. Laila has had no training in Indian dance. Krishna teaches her and makes her his leading dancer after just a couple of months. The troupe moves to USA. The reception they get there is very inhospitable. After managing to get a few performances, the troupe leaves for India. Laila accompanies them. On arriving in Bombay, Krishna puts her in a filthy flat. She falls sick, is rejected by Krishna, goes on a pilgrimage, discovers a guru who accepts her immediately as his star pupil and successor. By the time Sophie gathers all

146 Jyotsna Sanzgiri, Anita Desai's Literary Journey: The Indian Currents (January 1996).
these strands of the life of the Mother, and returns to educate Matteo, the Mother is dead, Matteo has disappeared!

_Sabina Sawhney_ says, "The novel presents a view of traditional Indian religiosity, but this is contrasted by the aims of the Western main characters." Matteo, Sophie, and the Mother have all been disillusioned by what their own cultures have to offer and are thus looking towards India for enlightenment. In this postcolonial era, the West is no longer trying to retain control over India. Rather, we are looking to them for fulfillment. Desai presents a vision of the world in which this second attempt is as ridiculous as the first.

In this, Desai is representing the expectation of instantaneous gratification present in the Western world. Matteo expects enlightenment to be easy, something akin to the touch of God experienced by born-again Christians. But most of us know that nothing good comes easy, that anything great is worth waiting for, that perseverance pays off. The true masters of Eastern faith are the gurus, the yogis, those who have devoted years of their lives to meditation and study

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148 Chandra Holm, Western Decline, Eastern Increase: Matteo, Sophie and the Mother as Postcolonial Metaphors cholm at SWISSONLINE.CH (Sun Jan 7 04:39:15 CST 2001).
in order to find answers to life's great questions. The Mother tells her supplicants that by listening to her voice each evening, and living communally-helping each other but not themselves-they can live in bliss. Dharwadker says, "If only it was that easy!" 149

This frustration is what Sophie experiences throughout their Indian excursions. She does not understand why she and Matteo cannot fulfill each other, why he needs to look outside for satisfaction. Her search is much more complex than Matteo's basic human compulsion towards religion. Matteo is seeking spiritual enlightenment, but for Sophie fulfillment lies in earthly love.

These sorts of statements are thought of as sacrilege. The human life of the sadhu, or saint, is not to be acknowledged after they become holy. Yet Sophie only finds something valid in this "real" life of the woman her husband is entranced by. Her search for the Mother's history is a cathartic process by which she can reach her own salvation. At the end of the novel, she finally understands the pull that those she has been surrounded by had felt. "Sophie is lying as

still as a stone, with an arm across her eyes, thinking in the
dark of that first pilgrimage she went on in India that had
ended in the death of a child. Now she knows why the mother
went on that pilgrimage, why anyone goes on a pilgrimage,
and why she must go too" (p. 305). She now realizes that the
self alone cannot be satisfied and that the need to search for a
greater power is within her as well.

From different perspectives, it is the Mother that makes
understanding possible for both Matteo and Sophie, but the
Mother is only another Westerner looking for answers in the
mythical India. While Laila, the Mother, is of Egyptian
descent, she was raised in a very European environment. She,
like Matteo, perpetually looks for something beyond the
constraints of the life presented her. From a very young age
she is enchanted by the expressiveness of dance rather than
the words in her parents books. "I want-I want-to dance. Not
sit here, reading, reading, reading-but out, dancing! Then I
would be free-" (p.165). After she begins her lessons with
Madame Beaunier, Laila is disillusioned by the Western
rigidity of eurythmics and cries out that she wants to dance
"whatever it is the music expresses, and that is sometimes joy,
sometimes grief, sometimes desire-It is not about nothing-not
just to make us jump and skip. It has some meaning surely? It
must be about something?" (p. 189).

Without knowing what she is looking for, she knows
instinctively how her questions would be answered. When she
finally discovers Krishna’s dance troupe, she feels that her search has reached its end. Her childish adoration quickly gives way to a recognition that although Krishna claims the status of guruji, he is a mere performer, a mere entertainer. Then she began running after gurus. She said dancing was not for her, she wanted to live a spiritual life. The inspired "madness" of her diary indicates that on her final journey to the Master’s ashram, she feels the presence of the godhead under the bodhi tree:

“Before my eyes the great banyan tree burst into light, and I saw light travelling, pouring through the veins in its leaves, its twigs and branches and the very trunk itself so that it was transformed into an earthly sun and fire revolved through it as blood revolved—once more!—through my body. I was on fire, the tree was on fire, light blazed and the whole sky was illuminated” (p. 296).

Stress, illness, and suggestion could have caused this possible hallucination. But Laila feels that it is the defining moment preparing her for reincarnation during the same lifetime into the consort of the Great Sage, the true "Radha who beheld, at last, the true Krishna" (p. 300). As for Matteo, her enlightenment comes in an overflow of powerful emotion, sought after but not worked for. For them, the defining religious experience is exclusively bhakti-yoga without the balance of jnana-yoga. Because of this they remain not quite fulfilled—the Mother's superficial reincarnation requires the
presence of her bhakta, and Matteo is not complete without his guruji the Mother. The only bit of hope for true enlightenment that Desai leaves us is the pilgrimage Sophie will be embarking on after the last page is finished. Her previous aim to debunk all that she has been exposed to leaves her an empty vessel to be filled by that which cannot be denied.

When we learn the Mother's story, we see it as an earlier version of their own -- the story of a young girl growing up in Cairo and finding her way East by joining a troupe of Indian dancers she has met in Europe. Her journey, a young woman's daring progress through Paris and Venice and New York, until she finds her moment of transcendence in India, comments on, and gives added breadth to, the young couple's quest. Brigitte Frase says, "In telling what happens to Matteo and Sophie and the mother, Anita Desai gives us a novel of great richness, an extraordinary vision of a country, and a compassionate portrait of people struggling to find a spiritual home. Journey to Ithaca is her most powerful and most involving novel."\(^{150}\)

When Sophie returned to the ashram after knowing the story of the Mother, to her dismay Matteo was not there. She came to know that the Mother died of cancer. After the death

of the Mother, he spent days and nights lying on the gravel by her samadhi. Then he just got up one day and left towards north to the mountains where the Mother received the enlightenment.

In *Journey to Ithaca*, Desai has created an India that can rise above centuries of colonialism by reflecting on the power of its history. She attempts to explain these relationships. Religiosity is represented traditionally through Matteo's stumbling path towards the Mother, who symbolizes the corruption of that religiosity. The Mother, Matteo, and Sophie as the Other, are left-overs from a passing era and do not understand the true power of historical faith in the emerging nation. One of the problems in the criticism of postcolonial literatures is a lack of language in which to resolve the complex relationships we find.

Desai's narrative presents a view of not only the Indian sociopolitical life, but also how it relates and differs from the Western world. Her personal attachment to both halves of the planet is part of why this is effective. As Dharwadker says, "Anita Desai is half-German but has lived mainly in India: her bicultural sensibility negotiates the pluralities of Indian experience in her fiction without creating a bicultural

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milieu.” \(^{152}\) Her genetic biculturalism positions her to be able to look at both East and West objectively while her sensibilities side her with India. The failure of Matteo, Sophie, and the Mother to actually reach the true enlightenment they seek shows that they are representative of how the influences of the West are corrupting and that the focus should be on a traditional Indian cosmology.

Although Westerners are becoming disillusioned with the emphasis on materialism in our culture we are still unable to surmount the limits of that society to accept something outside of our cultural consciousness. Desai, while taking an Indian stance, understands this juxtaposed need and unwillingness to look into Eastern culture to fill the gaps left by the superficiality of the West. She uses this understanding to explain not only the flaws in the Western system, but also as an opportunity to explain, by reflection, the true differences between cultures despite an innately human need for fulfillment. Matteo, Sophie, and the Mother function as a foil for the approach toward the future that should be made by Indians. The Other no longer has a place on the sub-continent, and reestablishing a community, a culture, a state, a fulfilling way of life will have to be established by Indians on their own terms. Jeak Pickering says, “Looking at Journey to Ithaca through a postcolonial framework reflects her mutual

\(^{152}\) Dharwadker, English Postcoloniality 102.
juxtapositions of East and West, and a traditional India with an India reasserting itself after Independence. The bombardment of British morality and social institutions has weakened the integrity of a purely Indian, purely Hindu, society. The Mother's ashram is very direct evidence of this, but most of her devotees are young foreigners, although there are some of the Master's older, Indian bhaktas (p. 96).

Desai is presenting a view of India in which the old ways remain the most powerful, as evidenced by all the other ashrams Sophie and Matteo visit. She has created an India that can rise above centuries of colonialism by reflecting on the power of its history. Sawhney echoes this idea saying "India must acknowledge that her greatest strength lay in her traditional virtues.

Sharon Weinstein says, “The last third of Journey to Ithaca, which traces Sophie's search for the truth about The Mother, becomes a tapestry of an extraordinary woman's life. What Sophie discovers is that at the end of every journey is one's self.” When we learn the Mother's story, we see it as an earlier version of their own -- the story of a young girl growing up in Cairo and finding her way East by joining a


154 Sharon Weinstein, An Elliptical Religious Journey (Norfolk State University).
troupe of Indian dancers she has met in Europe. Her journey, a young woman's daring progress through Paris and Venice and New York, until she finds her moment of transcendence in India, comments on, and gives added breadth to, the young couple's quest.

*Journey to Ithaca* does not yield itself easily to the reader. Like its characters Matteo, Sophie and the Mother - who get lost and confused in their wanderings - so is the reader led around the center of the story as in a maze. Desai's novel ends where it begins, as it circles back into itself. A journey, for the reader, worth taking, "Celebrating Absences." Anita Desai is a sophisticated storyteller who circles around her tale, rather than tell it straight. *Bruce Allen* says that the texture of her language is so lyrically thick, sometimes the plot is obscured. She presents India itself as a character - mysterious, contradictory, rich and elusive.\(^{155}\)

Her *Journey to Ithaca* traces the pilgrimages of not one but three seekers after truth, spelled with a capital T. "Fine fare for thoughtful readers with a taste for exotic settings."\(^{156}\) Her research turns up an engaging tale of the feisty young girl, half-French, half-Egyptian, who eventually

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\(^{155}\) Bruce Allen, Ed., Kirkus Reviews and a freelance reviewer for the Boston Globe, Sewanee Review.

\(^{156}\) Starr E. Smith, Library Journal (Marymount Univ., Arlington, Va.)
became the Mother. Paul Gray says, "But this half of Journey to Ithaca does not mesh convincingly with the saga of Sophie and Matteo. It seems less a tale within a tale than a totally discrete narrative." Desai beautifully describes the Indian landscapes, but the people who move through them, especially the three principals, seem so monomaniacal about their journeys that they remain, in the end, inaccessible.

Anita Desai writes well, lucidly and convincingly, when she describes the outside world. When she describes the pilgrimage that Matteo and Sophie join months after their coming to India, when she describes the beaches of Goa hazy with the clouds of drug that is being smoked there, we felt like a witness. The passage in which Desai describes the meeting between Sophie and the Mother is one of the most beautiful ones in the book. Chandra says, "It is in such passages rich with symbols that I could finally glimpse Desai's craft."

Where she fails in this novel is in characterization. One never understands how Matteo ticks, why he is ready to accept anyone and everyone as his saviour, why he accepts that living in filth is essential to spiritual quest. The part dealing with Laila is the least convincing in the entire book.

157 Paul Gray, The Universe in a Stone.

That this girl is yet another rebel is fine, but that she is so utterly uncaring towards the needs of all but her own is portrayed a bit too thinly. That she becomes the leading dancer of an Indian dance troupe within two months of starting to learn the dance is as unconvincing as her later incarnation as the Mother. The one character who has some spirit, one person who comes across as being a real person instead of being a two dimensional caricature is Sophie, but unfortunately her part is not sketched to the full. Chandra Holm in his review says, "Just when I thought that this is a good book (the part where Sophie sees the Mother), the novel loses all the tension that was built up till then. It suddenly becomes too filmy, too unreal to be credible." If this journey is a journey to Ithaca, it is one that does not fulfill, that does not satisfy.

The Publisher Comments, "What these three people discover is at the heart of this masterful novel--that wisdom is found in the journey itself, and not at its destination." At least since E.M. Forster, India has been literary shorthand for spiritual quests. Desai, who has written of India before, is too sophisticated a writer to offer unambiguous answers to eternal questions. Kathryn Harrison says, "In Journey to Ithaca, all that is properly mysterious remains so and it is testimony to

159 Chandra Holm, Western Decline, Eastern Increase.
160 The Publishers Weekly.
the author's clear vision and her pungent, exact prose that arguments about the nature of divinity or meaning can capture and hold the reader, that they seem as much issues of life and death as the carnal manipulations of more pedestrian fiction..."\(^{161}\)

There are diverse opinions about this novel. One reviewer says, "This is one of the worse books I have ever plodded through. I can't believe I actually finished it. It is full of rambling prose, and uninteresting characters, in a very boring, uneventful plot. Why would anyone want to write such a book? What is the point? Why would anyone want to write about this kind of indulgent, boring uninteresting people, even though I know their type exists." Many readers find it very disappointing. Vinayak says, "I did not find this book interesting. I had to struggle to finish it. A lot of time the book was very boring and going nowhere in the name of spirituality. I read this novel with great anticipation as I liked Desai's 'Clear Light of The Day' very much. If you are expecting something like that then this novel will come as a disappointment."\(^{162}\) Another reader said, "I forced myself to plow through the first third of the novel, then suddenly, I was

\(^{161}\) Kathryn Harrison, (Random House Group:01 May, 1995).

\(^{162}\) Vinayak @ yahoo.com (Arlington, VA, January 8, 1999).
very happy I was in the thick of it. It was Sophie who finally captured me."\(^{163}\)

*Journey to Ithaca* described by some overseas critics as Desai's most powerful work to date, is more about banishment than about a journey. It examines at close quarters how foreigners especially from the West react to India in different ways. Most of the readers find the novel very interesting: "Gorgeous. Desai is a writer who repays re-reading. This book is subtle and textured. The author plays marvellously with time and consciousness in ways reminiscent of Virginia Woolf, brought up to date."\(^{164}\)

In telling what happens to Matteo and Sophie and the mother, Anita Desai gives us a novel of great richness, an extraordinary vision of a country, and a compassionate portrait of people struggling to find a spiritual home. No doubt *Journey to Ithaca* is her most powerful and most involving novel.

\(^{163}\) Bruce Allen, Ed., Kirkus Reviews.

\(^{164}\) Book Reviews.