

Journey to Ithaca: A Letter on Recent Indian English Fiction

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Dear Viney:

Many thanks for allowing me to send my ideas and thoughts on recent Indian English fiction (IEF) in the form of a letter. As you know, in the last few years I have been trying to get out of the straitjacket of what is considered standard academic discourse because it is inhibiting and oppressive. This discourse, at its best, is a received discourse in which our voices are seldom heard. Besides, it often precludes a free and informal flow of ideas. But, apart from such larger ideological considerations, I suppose I also wanted to circumvent certain drawbacks, inabilities, or inadequacies of mine which I am acutely aware of. For instance, if some of points that I wish to make here were to be put into a proper paper, they would require a more elaborate and substantial kind of research than I feel equal to this at this juncture. Finally, it seems to me that recent IEF itself--amorphous, unsettled, evolving as it is--is perhaps more amenable to treatment in this more informal mode. That is why this letter between two serious, informed, and concerned students (and teachers) of IEF may be a more suitable method of exchanging ideas. Of course, I am not unaware that "others" are listening in on this dialogue too. So much for preliminaries.

Your brief to me was to write on Anita Desai's latest novel, *Journey to Ithaca* (London: Heinemann, 1995). But as I was reading the book, I thought that some of my thoughts and feelings on reading it might apply to a larger corpus of recent IEF. Hence the title. It seems to me that an experience of reading this body of writing might resemble that of reading Desai's novel; furthermore, this type of experience is strongly prefigured in the Cavafy poem which gives Desai's book its title and forms one of its two epigraphs. But I shall come to this later, explaining it in greater detail.

Before I go on to discussing Desai's novel specifically, I would like to make a few generalizations about recent IEF. What are its distinctive qualities and attributes? What makes it special? These are the questions which I have kept in mind when I set down the following reflections. No doubt, most people in the field may have also come to similar conclusions.

1. Expansion

In the last ten or fifteen years, the authorship and readership of IEF has grown exponentially. This is a significant happening. During this period I estimate that at least 150 new writers were born, of which at least fifty are women. Thus, there is a huge expansion in the base of IEF. Perhaps, the most remarkable sign of this is the fact that there are three generations of IE writers simultaneously active today.

2. Increased International Visibility

IEF is no longer a local phenomenon. After Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) it has acquired a new international visibility and market. A large number of IE novelists have been published abroad, commanding better and better terms. The greatest success story of this decade is definitely Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) which got an advance of over a million dollars.

3. Change in Self-Definition and Identity

After such international exposure, IEF is not longer merely a national activity. It has become transnational, inter-cultural product, a sort of frontier literature. Of course, several of its practitioners remain confined in India, having no audiences outside because their publishers are Indian. Yet, there is always this possibility of breaking through into international stardom. At any rate, the best known of these writers usually live abroad, in metropolitan centres where their work is published. There is, thus, an entire cultural politics of these literary "stars"; they allow themselves to be appropriated and commodified. IEF, consequently, suffers from a crisis of legitimacy and authenticity at home.

4. Boom in Indian Publishing

Penguin India turned ten years old in 1995. In this decade, it has carved a unique place for itself in Indian publishing by discovering and publishing several new authors not just from India but the subcontinent. Other publishers, old and new, have tried to emulate its success. These include Rupa, HarperCollins India, Disha Books, Affiliated East-West Publishers, and so on. Printing and production standards have been raised too. Books are available more widely and there has been a resurgence in bookshops. Yet, for a country of 900 millions, these improvements are shockingly inadequate. A sale of just 10,000 copies constitutes a bestseller in fiction. The market is, thus, very, very tiny. Cheap Indian reprints of foreign bestsellers still dominate the paperback market. A Sidney Sheldon or Robert Ludlum title may easily sell 40,000 copies which a new IE novel will struggle to go through an initial print run of 2000.

5. With an increase in the market, new genres and lines have found a demand. Now, in addition to literary fiction, we have popular fiction, romances, children's writing, and thrillers, all written by Indian authors. For the first time in IEF we may speak of popular versus serious writing, say, Shobha De versus Anita Desai or Ashok Banker versus Raja Rao.

6. New Directions in Form and Content

Again, *Midnight's Children* may be seen as a convenient point of departure, popularising if not inaugurating a new way of writing India. Fabulation, magic realism, fantasy, metafiction, postmodernism, and so on, have suddenly come to dominate the landscape of IEF. These trends, though prevalent abroad for decades, had a delayed impact on India. But when they did arrive, they came with a bang. Now, it seems to me, these modes of writing are tiring, having lost their initial novelty and attractiveness.

Perhaps, we are now looking forward to a return of more traditional, realistic patterns of fiction.

7. Narratives of Disintegration

It seems to me that one way of summing up what Rushdie's children stand for is to call them deconstructionists. Most of them break down or subvert the master narratives of the nation which an earlier generation of novelists so carefully constructed. In those heady days of nationalism,

fiction played an important role in giving voice and expression to the needs and hopes of a new nation. Later, several smaller stories began to undermine the claims and visions of these grand narratives. Hence, Rushdie and his school are largely deconstructive in their approach. Their fragmentary narratives celebrate minority experiences. The experience of Anglo-Indians (I. Alan Sealy), Parsis (Boman Desai), expatriates (Hanif Kureishi), Westernised Indians (Upamanyu Chatterjee), immigrants (Bharati Mukherjee), and other such marginalized people becomes the focus of IEF.

8. Women's Writing

Of all these minorities, the most important are women. A separate fictional territory has been mapped by them. Whereas men's narratives tend to be large, social, picaresque, flamboyant, historical, political, and basically exterior, those of women are interior, personal, more modest, domestic, subtle, and sensitive. There are, of course, exceptions, but never before has the experience of women been mapped in such variety and finesse in IEF.

To sum up, I think that there are basically two ways of talking about IEF--via the language of continuity or via the language of change. As I have tried to show above, while there are significant changes, there are also continuities. Yet, it is obvious that the language of ruptures is the favoured mode of defining recent IEF. Perhaps, market forces favour the radical departures, prodigious breaks, and unprecedented originality, even if these actually don't exist. That's why the new generation has all but displaced the middle and older generations. Few people wish to discuss the work of Raja Rao or Mulk Raj Anand these days. Similarly, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, or Arun Joshi have completely gone out of favour.

II

I think I should now come to *Journey to Ithaca*. Its central movement is anticipated in Desai's earlier novels. Protagonists seek a solution to their problems; they feel that the solution lies in discovering some lost essence which they have already experienced, usually as children; they undertake a journey to recover that lost essence; but after what is a difficult voyage, they end up disappointed, disillusioned. In the later novels, this disillusionment is seen as a concomitant to real, adult

maturity and therefore almost accorded a positive value.

Though such a pattern is seen from Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), of the earlier novels, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975) best exemplifies it. Sita, the heroine, has already borne four children; now, with a fifth in her womb, she suffers from a deep spiritual crisis. Why should she bring yet another life into this world which is so meaningless and brutal?

To find answers she goes to Manori, a semi-magical island where her father presided as a healer, guru, and legendary figure. Slowly and painfully, she reexamines all that had seemed so wonderful, so illuminating in her childhood only to discover that her father was in fact a charlatan, a fake. In the end, a disillusioned Sita waits for her uninteresting husband to take her back to Bombay. In an interview, Desai explained how if she had been younger, she would have made her character, Sita, kill herself like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. But with the maturing of her art and vision, Desai began to see how most triumphs were really compromises with life. In fact, we find almost the same pattern repeated again in what is considered one of her strongest novels, *In Custody*. Again, the central movement is towards a deglamorization of the protagonist's fantasies. The process of self-discovery, though it does not yield the promised

ecstasies, does result in much pain and some knowledge. The point is that the journey is more important than the destination.

This is the message of Cavafy's poem too:

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 your old,

rich with all you have gained on the way,

not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

That is, the journey is far more important than the destination. Ithaca does not offer "riches" but only a resting place in old age. All it gives is "a beautiful voyage":

Ithaca has given you a beautiful voyage.

Without her you would never have taken the road.

But she has nothing to give you now.

And yet, there is some value in what Ithaca stands for, after all:

And if you have found her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.

With such great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience

you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

The plural, *Ithacas*, in the last line underscores the symbolic nature of Ithaca. Ithaca becomes a trope for all kinds of human longing which, however, are more valuable for the quests they induce than for any ultimate fulfilment. The poem, thus, moves beyond a simple affirmation or an equally simple negation to more complex and rich states of intermediate satisfaction.

In this novel, India, more specifically, spiritual India, becomes a kind of Ithaca. The main characters are Sophie and Matteo, a European couple, who come to India as hippies in the early 1970s, in search for spiritual enlightenment. Rather, it is Matteo who is drawn to this India of yogis, sages, and mystics, partly through a reading of the book which was at the heart of the hippie cult, Herman Hesse's *The Discovery of the East*. While Matteo is a dreamy, "feminine" Italian with an unhappy childhood, his wife Sophie is a hard-headed German who is practical and quite materialistic in her approach. Most of the novel is from her point of view.

The story begins with Matteo lying sick in a hospital in India. Sophie has come to fetch him. Matteo's sickness is partly a result of the death of the Mother, the spiritual leader in whose ashram Matteo has finally found his destination after much wandering and sorrow. Sophie, who had left Matteo at the Mother's ashram earlier after the birth of their second child there, has done her investigations of the past of the Mother. She has uncovered what Desai must have intended to be a tale of astonishing and startling surprises. The Mother was actually Laila, born in Egypt, the daughter of Alma and Hamid. She went to study in Paris where she was entranced not only by Eastern occult and spirituality but by an Indian dancer named Krishna. Joining his troupe, she tours Europe and North America before going to India with him. Once here, she suddenly disappears to the ashram of a guru and remains behind there after his death as the Mother. Sophie actually meets an old and emaciated Krishna who gives her the Mother's diary. This is the climax of the novel. Armed with this knowledge, she returns to look for Matteo. Relating this story to the pattern suggested earlier, the following would appear to be the

"intended" reading of the novel or, at least, the most obvious, first order interpretation. Like Ithaca, India has yielded little on arrival, least of all the promised and sought-after enlightenment or nirvana. Yet what it has offered is a rich voyage of self-discovery and, to Sophie, an even more exciting investigative adventure into the construction of gurudom. In other words, this is yet another narrative of disillusionment. The message is reminiscent of *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971): don't expect anything special from India; it's just another, tired, poor, dirty, and hungry third world country, though not devoid unexpected, and memorable compensations. Of course, in the earlier novel, there was a similar message about England as well; there is bidirectional disillusionment, with a cross-migration of two sets of characters. The point that Desai makes in both novels has to do with the nature and consequences of human expectations. We don't get what we expect, but if we are capable of opening ourselves to

what
is

, to the reality, so to speak, then will we be given something else which is comparable in value. The problem is that we seldom interested in the real, that we constantly superimpose what we imagine upon it. It is this superimposition, this projection of our own fantasies and desires which causes so much bitter suffering.

III

So far so good. But there are several things in the text and outside it which complicate this sort of reading. First of all, there is a fundamental, almost irreconcilable difference between Matteo and Sophie. This is seen from the very beginning of the book and highlighted even in simple things like Matteo's long hair versus Sophie's short, "manly" cut. The fundamental difference is, of course, in their approach to life. Matteo is seriously interested in spirituality, though he is somewhat weaker-willed than Sophie. Sophie, on the other hand, is totally unattracted to all this mystic mumbo-jumbo. Hence, we are talking not of one quest but of two.

Here again, there is a further complication. While it is reasonably clear what Matteo wants, it is never fully clear what Sophie does. In the beginning this difficulty is less serious: while Matteo wants to visit gurus and ashrams, Sophie wants to go to Goa to have a good time. She does the latter, but lands into further difficulties. Separated from Matteo, Sophie goes into a sort of hippie hell, lying drunk and utterly destitute in her own vomit. Such degradation is totally out of character with the otherwise self-possessed and stable Sophie.

Well, presumably, Sophie wants neither the senseless hedonism of the hippies nor Matteo's spiritual delusions. If so, what does she want? In the end, in fact, she is turned into something of an investigative journalist, uncovering the Mother's past with such single-minded determination. Incidentally, she is introduced into the novel as a freelance journalist and her initial motivation of visiting India is to write about it. So, let's assume that she reverts, albeit involuntarily, to her initial role and vocation. Yet, throughout the novel, we know more about what she doesn't want than what she does. She constantly criticises both Matteo and things Indian. On a pilgrimage with a group of believers, for instance, all that she sees as an outcome is a dead child in the hands of a helpless mother. That, it would appear, is the result of such foolish beliefs according to her. Moreover, because Sophie is at the centre of the narrative, it is her viewpoint which predominates. Alternative readings are possible only when we reduce her authority and question

her interpretations of people and events. An important interpretative issue therefore is just how reliable and believable Sophie is. It is soon evident that for a more productive reading of a novel, we shall have to look through and and yet beyond her.

We realize, to begin with, that Matteo is reasonably satisfied being the Mother's close disciple. The fact that he falls sick after his guru's death does not necessarily mean that he shares Sophie's skepticism or disillusionment. Though the "objective fact" of Matteo's sickness is meant to substantiate the triumph of Sophie's materialistic reading of India, is it indeed so? To my mind, the dichotomy remains and is never fully resolved. What is clear, on the other hand, is the author's anxiety to tip the scales in Sophie's favour, to valorise the failure of Matteo's spiritual project. Yet, the possibility of the success of such a project is never entirely suppressed. Somewhere in the heart of the novel, this tension persists. Perhaps, it is Sophie who is wrong; perhaps, the Mother and Matteo are right. It is such a subterranean, unexorcised ghost that in fact saves the novel from being a total failure. The very vehemance of Sophie's objections, paradoxically, confirms Matteo's (and by extension, the reader's) faith.

The unresolved tension is also evident in the portrayal of the Mother, perhaps the most crucial aspect of this book. Again, this is largely negative. Though the Mother is seen from Sophie's critical and skeptical point of view, her character still assumes a certain autonomy. A mystery and sense of spiritual grandeur do get conveyed. Mastery over lower nature, unexpected love and compassion, a great organizational ability, an instant magnetism--all these qualities and more do get conveyed inspite of Sophie. The Mother, however, remains a reclusive, enigmatic figure, not fully comprehensible to either Matteo or Sophie. There is, of course, a rather simplistic psychological explanation which Desai offers to those who will take it: Matteo's childhood is unhappy; he has never known parental love; hence his spiritual quest and his surrender to the surrogate mother. Such an explanation, however, will not suffice. The power and charisma of the Mother's ministry cannot be denied so easily. Even after Sophie's expose of her ordinary past, the Mother still remains a challenging character.

This brings us to a question which will often be raised: how closely does Desai's character resemble the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry? While I do not propose to conduct a detailed source study, it seems to me that Desai's character is an amalgam of two historical figures. The American dancer, Ruth St. Denis and Mira Richard, who later became the Mother of Pondicherry. Perhaps, to obviate unnecessary speculation, Desai herself supplies a list of the books which helped her to write the novel. Certain incidents in the book can indeed be traced to some of the other books mentioned. For instance, the episode about the occultist who produces various fragrances is taken from Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

It is amply clear, however, that the real Mother of Pondicherry was a far vaster, greater, and superior being than the one Desai has created. In that sense, the novel is a total disappointment. It fails to come to terms with the Mother as a spiritual phenomenon. Yet, there is nothing overtly disrespectful in the portrait, nothing scurrilous, vulgar, or obscene; Desai, unlike Rushdie, is not likely to hurt the feelings of the faithful. And yet, hurt they will be because the book reduces the stature of the Mother; acknowledging that she had based her character on the real person only worsens things. This vexed issue is unlikely to disappear. Though no "official" responses from devotees have been forthcoming so far, they cannot be ruled out in the future.

IV

You may recall, Viney, that you wanted me to write on this novel because you considered me to be, relatively speaking, "an insider" to the Indian spiritual traditions. Desai's novel had been

attacked by several reviewers for being mediocre and unsatisfactory. Perhaps the best example of such a view was Pankaj Mishra's article in the *Indian Review of Books*. You wanted to know if the novel was indeed lacking in merit or was it attacked because of the reviewers' unfamiliarity with its material. Indeed, that's why you wanted me to write on it because you thought I might be able to make a more informed and fair judgement.

Actually, when I heard that *Journey to Ithaca* was about the Mother, I too was very keen to read it. I knew that Desai had met J. Krishnamurti and also written about him. Perhaps, I thought, she's finally turned spiritual. So I was looking forward to this novel with interest and anticipation. I must repeat that I was sorely disappointed. The novel failed to engage seriously with the phenomenon of spirituality. A part of me was angry at this seeming insensitivity. If Desai had such little insight and sympathy, why did she take on this kind of project? However, later, I felt a bit less upset and perturbed. I began to see this as a different kind of novel from what I had expected. This isn't a book which tries to make sense of Indian spirituality so much as to debunk it. This

is basically a rationalist-materialist, albeit liberal reading of spirituality. It is necessarily an outsider's perspective, not an insider's. Desai is so much an outsider here that one can scarcely consider her "Indian." Even the characters are European. Why? Is it because she feels closer to their point of view than that of any Indian's?

Predictably, Sophie, the author's mouthpiece, even wishes to know if the Master and the Mother had a sexual relationship (136-137). "Did thy marry?" she asks. Her informant, Montu-da, is embarrassed. "We are not speaking of--of ordinary beings, please. We are talking of supramental beings and the union of the divine," he replies. But Sophie persists, "Did they live as man and wife? ... As man and wife--physically?" Montu-da flushes purple, takes out a large handkerchief to mop his face. "As body and soul are one, yes." he replies. Obviously, the question is not totally resolved. But what I am trying to highlight is Sophie's attitude. Earlier, she taunts Matteo: "What is she anyway? ... Looks Indian, sounds Indian, but not Indian. Well, what is she then?" (131).

The point is not that such questions are unanswerable or embarrassing. Why should they be? Why should Montu-da be so ashamed or disconcerted? Such questions do have answers, but these answers may not tell the whole truth. Sophie wishes to

fix

the identity of the Mother, to consider her only from Sophie's own limited level of understanding. But, as Sophie herself realizes, such understanding is rather inadequate and reductive.

That the Mother is Egyptian, that she has been a dancer, and that the Master proclaimed his oneness with her does give us new information, but does not help her solve the riddle. The reason for this is that Sophie's understanding of herself is so limited. Presumably for her, whether two people have sex with one another or not is the paramount means ascertaining their relationship with one another. However, from the spiritual point of view, sexual union, that is the union of bodies, is not the most, but, perhaps, the least intimate of unions. Of the seven sheaths of the body, the physical, or the *annamaya kosha*, is the outermost. If so, if two people are really united at the higher levels of consciousness, their union at the physical is of little consequence: if it fulfils some purpose, it will take place; if not they can easily do without it. At least in Sri Aurobindo's yoga, sexuality was something which was meant to be by-passed and transcended.

Even today, the *sadhaks* and the *sadhikas* in the ashram are expected to practice *brahmacharaya*. This, or something to this effect, could have been a more appropriate answer to Sophie's query. Instead, the novel creates an aura of possibilities and ambiguities regarding this issue. The result is that, almost in spite of itself, Sophie's and Desai's lack of insight are foregrounded. As such, the novel becomes, willy-nilly, as much a critique of a "secular" reading of spirituality as of spirituality itself.

What I have been arguing is that a first order, literalist reading of the novel actually diminishes its stature. *Journey to Ithaca* as a critique of Indian spirituality is a failure. But when we start seeing it as a more sophisticated text which not only deglamorises Indian spirituality, but also debunks its rationalist-positivist interpreters, we begin to appreciate the novel better. No doubt, the latter self-critique is implied and covert, yet it is inescapable. The over-reactions and simple-mindedness of Sophie forces it upon us. We are forced to look beyond Sophie, to look beyond her reductive rejection of Indian spirituality. We are forced to admit that Sophie is not always right, indeed that her understanding is faulty and limited. The novel thus thrives on an irony and ambiguity. This, in my opinion, is the best way of giving the novel its due.

V

Yet, there is a further irony about *Journey to Ithaca* and, this, unfortunately, is not an irony directed at the reader but at the author herself. Desai, no doubt, intended India to be a type of Ithaca. Cavafy's poem itself hints at this in the last line when he says "you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean." The plural suggests that there are several Ithacas.

What I would contend, as a counterargument, is that India itself has been a potent and powerful symbol not just in our own tradition but in the Western mind too. And most certainly, India is "not" an Ithaca. This, in fact, is the crux of the problem with the novel. Desai's book might be successful as a journey to Ithaca, but never as a passage to India. And, unfortunately for her, she has chosen to liken India to Ithaca. Whereas Ithaca was a small, rather insignificant island to which a great Greek hero, Odysseus, had to perforce return after his wanderings, India is a large subcontinent, full of promise and mystery. This is a land in which all one's fantasies and desires can be played out; this is the golden bird of yore, the shangri-la, the cradle of world religions, the country of the Vedic Rishis, of Mahavir and Buddha, of Shankaracharya, of Kabir, Nanak, Tulsi, and Meera, of Sri Ramakrishna and Mahatma Gandhi. India is, thus, no Ithaca. To consider it such is a telling confession of inadequacy. It is an untellable metaphoric mismatch. India can become Ithaca only by an unnatural and implausible reduction of its stature. Even Western literary tradition does not support such a reduction. Both Whitman's "Passage to India" and Forster's novel of the same title suggest that a passage to India is always a passage to more than India. This "more" is, however, also a part of India itself, not really exterior to it.

In this sense, the notion of Ithaca applies not so much to Sophie's Matteo's journeys, not so much to the spiritualist India of Desai's contrivance, but to the readers' own efforts in reading the novel. The novel does not deliver what it promises. Its reading is disillusioning and disappointing; the reader is chastised for expecting too much. Why look for something that isn't there? Why look for an India when all you get is an Ithaca? After all, Anita Desai is not Raja Rao!

Ithaca, then, is an objective correlative of Desai's fictional limitations. It's good to read her as long as we don't expect to arrive.

The arrivals are always disappointing. The style, the sensitivity, the poetic appeal of the

language, ultimately, reveal an impoverished soul, a heart of lesser depth and wisdom, merely a well-intentioned modern mind, limited in range and understanding.

VI

I have already made this letter too long. I must bring my effusions to an end. My final contention is that the notion of a journey to Ithaca may apply equally well to recent IEF. Hailed and touted as the surpassing achievement of a brave new generation, this body of work has got more than its share of attention. It has produced heroes and international celebrities, big books which have done brisk business worth millions of dollars in the international publishing marketplace. Yet, unfortunately, all this hype and hoopla cannot hide its real poverty of imagination. I shudder when I have to read these texts. Such interminable narcissism! Such stylistic hypertrophy! Such garrulous gimmickry! Yet, not a single great book. Not a single book which touches a soul, which nourishes the mind and senses, which exhilarates and refreshes. Well, perhaps, one or two such books but no more!

I would put it to you that at the heart of recent IEF is a surpassing mediocrity. A poverty of spirit gnaws the vitals of much of this work. The modern writer is clever, even engaging, but seldom wise or prophetic. S/he fails to move us, to touch our innermost being, to uplift and inspire us. To that extent, this whole journey into the meaning of modern IEF, is merely a journey to Ithaca.

Yours sincerely,
Makarand