

*Journey to Ithaca:*

*A Reconnaissance of Indian Myths and Mysticism by Supriya*

Bhandari 

*Journey To Ithaca* (1995) by Anita Desai, exhibits her spiritual leanings. Actually, the title refers to three journeys in the novel: Journey of Sophie, of Matteo and of the mother. The novel derives its title from C.P. Cavafy's poem '*Ithaca*', translated by Roe Dalven.

Ithaca is the city where all the journeys end, it is the ultimate goal. To reach there, one has to cover a long path, full of joys and sorrows; providing invaluable gems of knowledge. What Ithaca itself promises? Nothing like riches, but it has already given one a beautiful journey. On reaching Ithaca, one can understand and value the precious possession of knowledge & experiences.

The novel begins with one quotation from *Immortality* by Milan Kundera: ".....*things exist in their essence even before they are materially realized and named.*"<sup>1</sup> The mother in the novel had such belief in the existence of supreme bliss, which makes her ransack all the corners of the earth, and she achieves that bliss in the Ashram at the Himalayan Peaks. Matteo finds it in the Mother's presence.

The novel opens with Matteo & Sophie, husband & wife: husband, an Italian and wife a German. Like all the other couples in Desai's novels, they are also not happy with their married life. But, here, the problem is not alone of temperamental incompatibility; rather it is something deeper than that. Matteo is an ascetic, a mystic and Sophie is a practical woman. It is the search of the Eternal Truth which makes Matteo alien to Sophie. They have two children but Matteo does not feel any attachment to them. They live their grandparents in Italy. Matteo has been feeling the qualms of a disquiet soul since his childhood. He was a failure at school; in the studies and in games too. He was kept at home under the guidance of a tutor who had given him. Herman Hesse's book '*The Journey to the East*'. This book, alone revealed him meaning of the meaningless life. It whetted Matteo's quest for God. All the efforts of his parents, to involve Matteo in business proved futile. He set out for India after his marriage. From one temple to the other, from one guru to the other, till in the presence of the Mother, he realized the Supreme Bliss. He dedicates his whole life to understand the mysteries of life and, in the end, we see Matteo as an ascetic, weeping at the tomb of the Mother.

Sophie marks a remarkable change in the perception of heroines of Anita Desai. She is self-reliant, a journalist by profession, frank and believes in logical explanation of things. She is a big, strong woman, square-shouldered; she wore her hair cut short and her eyes were a level grey. Her marriage with Matteo took place in the summer of 1975 and since then they had been traveling. Matteo took her to India though Sophie had no interest in the spiritual ways of life. However, they joined the group of gypsies there and moved from place to place. Sophie found all the pining and yearnings of Matteo as useless and meaningless. She married him to be always together. But it was all different with Matteo. She could not tolerate Matteo's indifferent attitude towards her. In India, Matteo learnt Sanskrit and read *Katha Upnishad, Vedas* and became more eager to meet the almighty. Sophie accompanied Matteo on his travels unwillingly.

She feared death. During a long journey towards a temple on the hills, Sophie encountered a woman with sunken eyes who had a sick baby on her lap; she did not have the courage to look at the face of the baby because she knew that it was dead. She declared to Matteo that she had realized the mystery of India: "*At its heart is a dead child. A dead child, Matteo!*"<sup>2</sup> Sophie was a foreigner in India and she was amazed to notice the skill of Indian women who bathed publicly and changed the wet clothes under the dry ones without showing any part of their body. She was educated and felt bad for the woman who had been walking such a long distance with sick baby because she knew that the baby was in need of urgent treatment, and not faith. She finds Matteo's inclination towards Indian Gods and myths, his ignorance. She could not be led to believe the superstitions of Indians. When they visit the woman saint who could fill the enclosed room with perfumes, the first time, she protested 'I have seen tricks like that at parties and magic shows. When I was a child, my parents would engage magicians to entertain us.'<sup>3</sup>

She flung away faith of Matteo in one puff of smoke. Matteo considered the long journey towards the temple, a blissful experience but Sophie refused to climb up the stairs. Because she lacked faith and conviction. For Matteo, India was an entity, but for Sophie, "*This whole country was populated with devotees; the gods could not have enough: now they recruited them from abroad as well.*"<sup>4</sup> She could not stand the sight of patients suffering from epileptic fits brought to saints for treatment. She mocked at Pierre Eduard, friend of Matteo who told Matteo & Sophie that they should not touch each other in the public. Sophie flushed and snapped angrily, '*If not, how do all those come about*?', pointing to the children who were rolling on the ground or tearing around like puppies.'<sup>5</sup> She was fed up with her life in India and forced Matteo to go back to their own country, but

Matteo had already stepped forward and for him, there was no looking back. Matteo was physically attached with Sophie they were living in an ashram in Bihar. But Sophie could feel the malice in Matteo's behavior. "*He would grasp her and manhandle her as if to hurt her and, infact, when she cried out in pain or fear, he would let out in a small laugh, exultant, as if he had achieved his end.*"<sup>6</sup> Sophie was not submissive. "*Sometimes, if she felt strong enough, she struck at him and fought him but this made him more violent.*" Matteo's disgust and violence attacked the mind of Sophie. "*She came to loathe herself, scratching at the scabs and boils on her body with something more than physical revulsion.*"<sup>7</sup>

Sophie could not bear separation from Matteo. After giving birth to two children, she leaves Matteo and moves to Italy, but there, she realizes that she cannot live without him. She was consumed by restlessness. She tries to be busy in shopping and roaming about but "*she knew she must fill the huge emptiness of Matteo's absence and this required some effort on her part.*"<sup>8</sup> When a young man Paolo showed great interest in India and questioned Sophie about India and yogis, he also offered Sophie to accompany him to India and give a surprise to Matteo. She spat at him, "*You? You are not fit to even enter his presence. He-he is a god.*"<sup>9</sup> She became a total introvert. But when she received the news of Matteo's illness she packed her bag and left with "*such speed it seemed nothing mattered to her but to be with him.*" She loved Matteo intensely and passionately, but Matteo's coldness stabbed her love-lorn heart. It was Sophie's love for Matteo and his carelessness, which had made her violent.

Once in the ashram of the Mother, Sophie was sick of Matteo's care for the sick mother. She reacted violently. She could not understand his concern for the Mother & neglect of herself & children. "Then Sophie, marching across to Matteo and grasping him by his hair, tugged at it hard, hissing, '*And immortality, Matteo? What about immortality? Or she is only of our world after all?*' Pursuing him against the wall and jerking his head by his hair, she cried, '*Now find out- what is mortal and what is immortal, what is sacred and what is profane. Now find out.*' She shook him and shook him by his hair till Giacomo began to cry for his father."<sup>10</sup> She hated the Mother because according to her, she was keeping Matteo away from her. She was filled with disgust at the thought of her husband being lured by another woman. She viewed the Mother as a small shrunken creature. "*For her the Mother was a monster spider who had spun this web to catch these silly flies.*"<sup>11</sup> She reaches India and nurses the sick Matteo and complain, "*All you wanted was the Mother, you told me that. You said you needed the Mother- not me, not the children.*"<sup>12</sup> She hated to talk about the Mother and wanted to discover the truth about her. She rebuked Matteo for unquestioningly

following her.

All these heated arguments & verbal violence resulted in communication gap between Matteo & her. She diverted all her attention towards Giacomo and Isabel. She would appear to Matteo as a lioness, busy with her cub. Sophie would guard her son even against his father. She yearned for Matteo's physical presence and Matteo started rejecting it by saying "*If you and I know ecstasy for a second, the ecstasy of the Mother's love lasts and lasts, it has no end' .....you area destroyer. You will destroy me.*"<sup>13</sup> Sophie rejected all his philosophy mockingly, covering up her ears and shouting, "*The Absolute, the soul, the Supreme Supra this and Supra that. Don't use those words, I am sick of them. They are non-words.*" Matteo retorted: '*And what words do you like? Don't tell me, I can guess. Food. Bed. Baby. House. Are those your words?*'<sup>14</sup> Sophie replied affirmatively and declared that she had wanted to hear these words again and again. This was the last time when she had felt Matteo's presence, Matteo responding. After that Matteo became stubbornly silent and whenever they met, Matteo was ill.

Their worsening relationship affected both the children. Sophie became busy in collecting facts about the Mother's life and Matteo was in India. The children were left in custody of the grandparents who could not bear the mischief of the children and would shout at them. Isabel's outburst of emotions while riding in car towards home fills the heart with sympathy for her. "*She dips her face down so Grandmother will not see. She tries to keep the sniffing to herself and yet the tears run.*"<sup>15</sup> Giacomo is sent to his uncle in the city for studies. While searching and collecting the facts about the Mother, Sophie realizes she herself has renounced her own children & never thought of them. Towards the end, she finds herself in a predicament and broods over her own life, leading her nowhere. The Mother had proved to be a saint. Matteo, a mystic, but she was nothing. She remembers the dead child and worried mother and finds no possible explanation to her queries. She only makes up her mind to follow Matteo and adds, "*I will have to. What else?*"<sup>16</sup>

The other important female character in the novel is Laila. She stands in sharp contrast to Sophie. Laila is mystical, having dedicated her life in search of her Master. Her life is a saga of a yearning soul. Laila was born in Egypt. Her mother Alma was worried with her frank ways. She would go out and would not return till night. Her vivid face, bright clothes and eyes, made black with lines of Kohl, her hands, moving in dancer's movements; all made her mother moan. Her parents were teachers and both were scholarly. But Laila had no interest in books.

They would sit waiting for young Laila till night. Laila would come, eat and would retire to her bed calmly. She would never tell them where she had been. *“Such a small child, so headstrong, so independent, it was dangerous.”*<sup>17</sup> She would give simple answers to their questions yet her answers would leave them confused. *“She stared at them with eyes like coal, so black and so brilliant. ‘I do not know myself’, she said so gravely that they could not accuse her of flippancy. ‘I go down the street, I turn a corner-I don’t know where I am’.....Do? I do nothing, I walk, I play, I look. But I do nothing.”*<sup>18</sup>

As she grew older, her hours of staying outside the home drew longer and longer. Her parents’ careful attitude would make her furious. She would tear at her hair and scream, *“You want me to be your prisoner, That is how I feel here - a prisoner.”*<sup>19</sup> She mocked at her parents’ effort to make her read because she only wanted to dance. Dancing gave her a feeling of freedom. She knew that freedom was natural instinct of all human beings. She should be given choice to do what she likes. *“Little made her so fierce as the idea of scholarship. It acted on her as idea of home did- she had for it the scorn she felt for her mother’s kitchen, her mother’s terrace garden, the apartment filled with silverware & photographs and chine dishes and statuettes. She had smashed some of them in her rage, seeing them as emblems of her imprisonment. She could have born a gypsy child, a foundling they had adopted.”*<sup>20</sup>

To arouse Laila’s interest in studies, her parents sent her to Cairo with a promise that if she proves to be a good student there, they would send her to Paris for higher studies. Laila could not resist the temptation of roaming the world. She was a mystic. She always took her life as a journey to the Abode of Bliss. So, she found her mother’s invitation, a good sign and agreed to go there. At the American college for Girls, she proved an intelligent student in spoken languages but she was fluent in French. But here, she became friendly with Fatimah who was in the group of revolutionary students who launched strike and created violent scenes for freedom from the British. Her mother’s friends reported all her activities and she sent her father to bring her back. But he came back with a promise that she would prove herself in the exams and she did. Here, Laila came in contact with the hagdah in a café, introduced to her by her friend, Ramadan. Nobody dared speak to her. She was an old woman who had covered her face in a veil and was never heard speaking. If anybody dared thrust his drained coffee cup, she would enter a brooding trance and by looking into the empty coffee cup, would speak some harsh words. Nobody could understand her fierce glance. But Laila did. She wanted to know and boldly thrust her drained coffee cup under her

face. She predicted. *'In the north, a city stands in water. There god and goddess meet' .....*And then, snapped the hagdah, jabbing one long finger. *"then eastwards top find a temple" .....* *'the temple of the Mother Goddess of the World.'*<sup>21</sup> Laila was sent to Paris for further studies. But her mind was tucked in the words of the hagdah and Paris was not a city that stood in water nor it was the place where the gods and goddesses live.

She had set one goal for her life and that was to experience the presence of God. At Paris, she found herself in another imprisonment; she was with her aunt, Francoise who lived there with her husband and four daughters. The atmosphere of the home was sickening. Everything was covered with silken covers. Windows were always shut. Curtains were always drawn. Laila hated such restrictions and as guided by her instincts, *"Laila could always contrive to have her blue silk coverlet slip off her bed and drag on the floor, to leave her shoes flung across the sheepskin rug, to throw her dresses into the cupboards instead of hanging them on the quilted stain hangers, and bring in a damp bath towel and drop it onto a velvet seat."*<sup>22</sup> Laila did everything which was not permissible in that house only with the intention that she would be sent back as this city has nothing to offer her. She abandoned her French studies & joined eurhythmic exercises. But it proved failure. Dance for Laila was not only stamping, jumping and swirling in motions, but it was something else. She wanted to express through her dance, *"Whatever it is the music express, and that is sometimes joy, sometimes grief, sometimes desire."*<sup>23</sup>

Nobody understood Laila and she became solitary. But what she learnt there made her understand the language of the wild beasts. Once she exercised her influence on Black Panther who seemed to understand Laila's movement & responded in a friendly way. Loitering on the streets, in the markets, she came across the bookshop of Madame Lacan. Her entry in this bookshop opened for here vistas of knowledge about Oriental countries. There were books of travel, art, philosophy & religion - *Rig Veda, Samhita, Rathavali, La Kama Sutra, Brhadanayaka Upnishad, La Bhagwad Gita, The sacred book of the East.* Laila, thirstily, slid a great heavy volume of the shelf, the *Attreya Brahmanan* of the '*Rig Veda*' and read:

*'There is no happiness for him who does not travel, Rohita!  
Thus, we have heard.  
Living in the society of man the best man becomes a  
sinner .....*  
*Therefore, wander!*

*The feet of the wanderer are like the flowers,  
His soul is growing & reaping thee fruit;  
And all his sins are destroyed by his fatigue 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!”<sup>24</sup>*

This discourse made clear to her, the value of adventures & journey in life. She became more interested in her mission. She became a regular visitor to Madame Lacan’s shop and kept on borrowing books, reading them & then returned them. Excess of reading and lack of sleep began to tell her upon health. But Laila was a girl of steel. The books made her destination more clearly in her mind. She could pursue her dreams at the cost of her health. She became vegetarian and accused the others in house as butchers who were eating meat. Now, Laila had equipped herself with the knowledge of the Eastern Gods and Goddesses. Her obsession with dance and her desire to speak through dance was fructified, when she looked at the poster of Krishan Lila in the same shop. She observed all the details carefully: one God, indigo blue, the other pale gold, both of them standing beneath the flowering trees, bare-footed, with anklets of rings of bells and looking at each other with elongated eyes of desire. Laila was dumb-found. She read the title: *Krishan Lila* and split in into two parts: Krishan Lila and then: Lila. Laila. Laila. Lila. Her heart danced at the thought of such approximation. She asked Madame Lacan about the posters, the dancers, their country, their show. Madame gave her the tickets to attend the show.

Laila was spellbound by the performance of the dancers. The atmosphere, the scent, their movements everything was alluring. She decided to join the troupe and presented Madame Lacan as her caretaker before the dancer, Krishan ji. She knew that her aunt would never permit her. Krishan ji was convinced and Laila joined the troupe. The initial months seemed to her like a dream coming true. Finally, she was speaking through her dance. She presented her love-lorn desires, beautifully in the dance of peacock. *“Her appearance was so striking that silence fell down before the drum began to beat and the cymbals to ring.....and began to move first her eyes, then her neck, then the arms and shoulders and hands, till finally her feet took up the beat and moved to*

*his command.....her assuming a wholly Indian art & culture and making it uncannily her own, or at something altogether inexplicable and subtle for which they had no words, only applause.”25*

Actually, she was presenting her own agony in her dance, her restlessness and her eagerness to meet the divine. But nothing was so smooth. Krishan ji took her as the leading heroine and visited America, Italy and other countries. Dancing which was once her passion became a headache for her. Exertion made her ill and one night she flew away from there. Somehow Krishan ji confidant made Laila meet him again. Krishna looked apologetic & brought Laila to India with himself. Krishna’s house in India was like another imprisonment for her and Laila was a child of nature. Freedom was her right. She found the home of Krishna in Bombay, stifling. She felt complete loss.

Krishna thought that Laila would be happy if she is taken to the temple. He sends her with other women. But Laila was not searching for these idols. She was brought to the Goddess of wealth, *Lakshmi*. They told her that it would make her rich and prosperous. But Laila never cared for money. Money would have been pouring in, if she had continued her dance in other countries. Famous, she became. But her heart desired something deeper and of permanent value. She rejected the idea of worshipping in that temple because she could not. She wrote about this in her diary, which Sophie had got from the same dancer Krishna, *“I cannot be made to worship what I do not believe. The truth is elsewhere. My search is not over. I must continue it. O where is my Lord whose calm face shines only with the pure light of truth?”26*

Krishna asks Laila to worship him and tells her that he is the Lord. *“He held the peacock crown upon his head and laughed at me. That is to me a travesty & a mockery. His dancer’s paint and costume is a mask behind which is an evil joker who mocks me.”27* Lila becomes more sick. She suffers from migraine & acute pain in stomach. She is taken to hospital, where she finds a friend in the nurse, Mary. Mary thinks that Laila’s agonies could be quenched with the name of Jesus. She presents a crucifix to Laila. Laila threw it on the ground, calling it an image of sin and suffering. She wanted truth and beauty. She declared herself as the daughter of beauty and joy. When Laila was taken home to Krishna, she was more defiant. She would scream if anyone came near to her. Krishna expressed his anger by tearing at his hair and shouting because his business was suffering. But Laila told him *“I did not know it was your career we came to make in India. I thought we came here to find the eternal truth. You told me it existed only in India and that we would together search for it and find it.”28*



Laila dared, defied and doomed the fake dancer. Destiny provided her with another chance to meet her master. One of the dancers, Vijaya, booked her seat on a pilgrimage that her family was undertaking towards the Himalayas. Laila thought and believed that this was her last effort to reach her master. She was exhausted and could go no more in his search. The long journey by rail, the prophetic words, the image of India, and her own visions combined to make her weep. Her life has been a journey, in quest of the master and she has continued her journey, by following signs, thrown on her way by the Lord. Even then, the wait was killing. She could not tolerate one more moment of separation. She encountered her first vision, on her way, in the banyan tree. The tree with its growing branches, long branches, touching the earth and taken root and spouted into yet other trees-she witnessed there '*Tree of Eternity*'. She found the tree bursting into light and the traveling light poured in the veins, in its branches and leaves and the tree 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. I cried out and covered my face with my hands.*"<sup>29</sup>

That vision helped Laila to cross the dreadful city and they reached in an ashram. It was a city surrounded by water and at night, she left her room, stepping forward to meet her master. She climbed, and climbed, night passed, many tempting scenes passed but she climbed up and up till she reached the peak of the mountain. She could hear her heart throbbing with joy at the prospects. The wind was blowing and it was producing music over the trees around her. Complete silence was there, when an eagle soared up in the sky with long, piercing cry. Laila felt: "*With it, my soul too set out in quest. At that moment, the evening star appeared in the heavens & shone out from the deep blue of infinity. Was that not a promise? An augury? I knew it was, and rising to my feet, I began to dance in ecstasy, the ecstasy of knowing my time had come.*"<sup>30</sup>

That was the celestial dance: a prayer, joy, love, pain, and yearning. Laila now beheld the beauty of her Master. A coolness touched her heart. Now, she was basking herself in his glory. She found the sweet calm upon his golden face and Laila knew that he had come for her only. When she has done her dance, she stands before him like a statue and replies to her question that she was *Lila*, his devotee. On hearing these words from *Lila* (Laila) the Master spoke to her the hidden wisdom, the Eternal Truth:

"Thou art *Shakti*, he pronounced,  
Supreme Power.  
Thou art *Durga*,  
Mother of us all.  
Thou art *Kali*,  
The Divine Force,  
And *Parvati*,  
Sweet Goddess of the Mountain.  
And all at once  
The Heavens burst into light and music  
Of joyous celebration  
The stars sang their jubilee  
The Moon its blessing gave.  
Fresh Himalayan winds blew  
From the Abode of Snow.  
The Master stepped forth and  
placing on my shoulders  
A shawl of ochre silk,  
Maiden, said He,  
Come follow me,  
And henceforth my home  
Thy Haven shall be."31

Thus, Laila becomes *Lila* - the manifestation of God. The words spoken by Master resolve all her mysteries. The truth, which she was seeking, was inside her. The concept of *Shakti*: Power, is the central to the Universe. Desai presents her feminist concerns, here, in the most beautiful and poetic manner. She makes woman, the center of the cosmos, assuming different forms and shapes: now as *Kali*, the divine and destructive; *Parvati*, sweetness of a wife and *Durga*, the eternal Mother. Like the Indian trinity: *Brahma* (the Generator), *Vishnu* (the Operator) and *Mahesh* (the Destroyer).

Desai presents three aspects of feminine personality

- one who gives birth, one who rears and then, one who destroys.

And all these images are wound in one single entity.

Laila is the most remarkable and wonderful creation, oriental at heart and in thoughts. Later, in the novel, we witness *Lila* as the caretaker of the ashram, run

by Master. Mystical powers add to the strength of *Lila*. She can now understand the sounds of birds and animals and the elements. Her life, which was before a search, now becomes a mission. She becomes Guru herself for the western people like Matteo. She becomes the Mother.

Her journey From Laila to Lila & then the Mother, is the victory of faith, truth and courage, all symbolized by her. She achieves what everyone desires. She becomes *Durga* who accepts all those who come to her, alike. Desai's heroine, here, is not fighting against biological differences and equal rights, but she is fighting for the Supreme. Laila excels all others in her quest for Truth.

- See more at:

<http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=2371#sthash.PL5dCv0y.dpuf>