

I think most of us, at least once in our life, have felt that “grass is greener on the other side” feeling. We like where we are in life, we have a lot of things going our way, but want to savor the life of someone else, the excitement of self-realization that might come in another place than our home and move to what we might think is a better life. That thought and pursuit of that that is itself a journey, and Anita Desai, in this novel, “Journey to Ithaca” brings out that journey along with a real journey.

This is the story of a couple, Matteo and Sophie, young Europeans who travel to India to discover its magic and seeking spiritual enlightenment. There is a clash in their worlds as well. Matteo wants to immerse himself into the world of India as he sees it, the wisdom he finds in the words of friends they find in India and swamijis and “the Mother”. He chooses to blindly follow it, whereas Sophie is more logical. She doesn’t want to travel all over India seeking enlightenment and is content to see the world as it is, in its shade of grey, and finds that love is more fulfilling. We also relive the journey of “The Mother”, a spiritual lady who they find in India, and see that her journey is also similar to theirs in some ways.

There are likeable aspects and dislikeable aspects in this book, both pushing the fine border that exists between them. What is likeable is the philosophy behind the plot, that “grass is greener” idea that I mention earlier. Before exploring India, Matteo feels India is the greener side, and he’s more intrigued after reading books like Siddhartha and The Journey to the East by Herman Hesse. When his life goes through a bumpy phase and he can’t seem to adjust, he runs away. It is a similar flight that brings him to India, with Sophie who willingly would follow him to the ends of the world. Sophie on the other hand realizes that not all is what it seems, and that Matteo is just blindly believing it. For her, with every ashram and ascetic they visit, Europe seems the greener side. When their son is born, she wants to move back, and takes necessary steps to try and convince Matteo to do so as well. These emotions, contrasting and clashing, are brought out beautifully by Desai. That clash shows Sophie’s affection and worry for Matteo as well. Looking between the lines, it also tells us to believe, but not blindly believe. And that true happiness comes with family.

What I didn’t like as much was the pace of the novel, which is tedious and slow at times. I was interested in Sophie and Matteo’s story, but not as much in the Mother’s. I also wished that a better ending was there. This one was like “it is there, yet not there”. Incomplete, to say it short. It also made me question what would be the state of things if

everyone believed all that in books is real and chased after that. It's good to enjoy books and be lost in the world, but not try to do everything that might be fictional.

Overall, a very nice story that can be re-read. But maybe not immediately after the first. It was engaging, and worth the experience.