

## A PORTRAYAL OF INDIAN MODERNITIES IN ANITA DESAI'S *A JOURNEY TO ITHACA*

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### Abstract:

Recently, Modernity in Indian English novels, as well as novelists, are of scrupulous interest. As an epitome of Indian modernity, Anita Desai plays a central role in the Indian fiction field. Generally, tradition refers to beliefs, customs and cultural practices that pass from one generation to another with their origin in some distant past. Modernity refers to contemporary behavior or way of doing things which can be viewed as fresh, new and modern. However, Indian culture is a blend of traditional values and the modern spirit. Tradition and modernity prevail side by side in India. Modernity is not altogether new in India. It prevailed since the pre-colonial era to the present. Anita Desai's *A Journey to Ithaca* serves as a very good example for portraying Indian Modernity. Hindu traditions that are prevalent from past times are not totally homogenous; some of them have imbibed the spirit of modernity and have abolished several social evils that characterized them. However modern society cannot break completely from old traditions. No society can do that. Indian society continues to live like two facets of a coin, that is, traditional and modern. What seems to have happened is we have accepted modernity in our professional work but we continue to be traditional in our lives.

As Deshpande points out, social movements in human history are responsible for shaping the world order into an image that holds at present. Especially colonization has been one of the starkest forms of reshaping in India. It has altered the way we think and function, and have provided us with ideological frameworks and intellectual tools we apply while dealing with any situation. Most of the Indian novels in English focus on this, starting from the trio writers, namely Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R.K Narayan. This paper focuses on the Indian modernities represented by Anita Desai.

Keywords: tradition, modernity, pluralism, colonization.

“- - - things exist in their essence even before they are materially realized and named.”

-Milan Kundera

## Introduction

Generally, tradition refers to beliefs, customs and cultural practices that pass from one generation to another with their origin in some distant past. Modernity refers to contemporary behavior or way of doing things which can be viewed as fresh, new and modern. However, Indian culture is a blend of traditional values and the modern spirit. Tradition and modernity prevail side by side in India. Modernity is not altogether new in India. It prevailed since the pre-colonial era to the present. Anita Desai's *A Journey to Ithaca* serves as a very good example for portraying Indian Modernity. Hindu traditions that are prevalent from past times are not totally homogenous; some of them have imbibed the spirit of modernity and have abolished several social evils that characterized them. However modern society cannot break completely from old traditions. No society can do that. Indian society continues to live like two facets of a coin, that is, traditional and modern. What seems to have happened is we have accepted modernity in our professional work but we continue to be traditional in our lives.

As Deshpande points out, social movements in human history are responsible for shaping the world order into an image that holds at present. Especially colonization has been one of the starkest forms of reshaping in India. It has altered the way we think and function, and have provided us with ideological frameworks and intellectual tools we apply while dealing with any situation. This paper attempts to identify modern aspects, which are being prophesized in contemporary society, in which it emphasizes particularly in the novel *A Journey to Ithaca* written by eminent Indian writer Anita Desai.

## Objectives:

1. It aims at the brief biography of the author and her contribution.
2. It aims at disclosing the modern aspects in the novel *A Journey to Ithaca*.
3. It also aims at the critical views given by various scholars.

## About the author:

Anita Desai (1937- ) was born in India to a German mother and an Indian father. She is considered to be one of the finest of Indian writers in English who handled diverse themes. She added many novels to her canon. She is the mother of well-known Booker prize-winning author, Kiran Desai. Most of her themes are based on women's issues dwelling on the insides of the characters psychologically. Her chief concern is for the individual's quest for truth, freedom, meaning, and value of life that provide spiritual nourishment to the self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world. She gives a new dimension to the genre of Indian writing in English by exploring the spiritual quest. Hence A. K. Bachchan says, “Anita Desai occupies a distinct and distinctive place in the

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realm of contemporary Indian English fiction.” Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth.

Anita Desai's ninth novel, *A Journey to Ithaca* takes a different stride from the Desai canon in more ways than one. It is not much concerned with the inadequacies of interpersonal relationship or quest for an authentic existence in a hostile world as some of her previous novels. Here for the first time, Desai deals with a theme that may be called spiritual. This novel may be described as a story of multiple journeys undertaken by the three protagonists who are like pilgrims. Desai examines the nature of their pilgrimage through their aspirations and adventures. At the same time, she explores the ambiguous nature of divine and profane love. In this novel, Anita Desai attempts to explore the meaning and nature of reality and also of illusion as two contrasting worlds of ideas and beliefs.

#### About the Novel:

The novel is divided into three sections like a prologue, six chapters following epilogue. The main characters in the novel are Matteo, Sophie, and Laila (mother). The entire novel revolves around them in attaining spirituality in the east by venturing into multiple journeys. In the prologue, the early life of Matteo who is considered to be a hero is made clear to the readers. Matteo is considered to be philosophic in thinking. For him, the school was like a "theorem set within a large theorem" (17). This mathematics fails him as a student at the school and also baffles him all the time. Whenever questions are asked he answered them in a different way. In the epilogue, we have Matteo's journey to India, his marriage with Sophie and the role of the parents in caring the grandchildren, Giacomo and Isabel. Rest of the section we have Sophie's encounter into the past of the mother (Laila) character and her realization, finally attaining spirituality under the guidance of mother at the mountain in the Himalayas.

Three characters in the novel have three different journeys coming as they are from three different regions. Three of them are from the West and their journey is towards Ithaca (India) to attain spirituality. Each character has their own quest for India in different ways and finally, they do it in a rationalist way rather than in a traditional manner. It is very interesting to note that 'whatever is traditional for the East becomes modern for the West, while the West is modern to the East.' But we must explore what makes the modern exactly. Is it because, it's looking new and extraordinary or rather it's out of thinking/simply, blindly following others' traditions as they are fascinating? This novel too encounters such questions and finally comes to the conclusion that using their intellectuality, rationality, and sensibility, the characters attain the spirituality which is implicit in the east. The Mother achieves it (302), Matteo imitates it (304) and Sophie follows it (305).

#### Aspects of Modernity:

Laila (mother) is the first main character (and daughter of Alma and Hameed following Islam from Egypt), who undertakes the first journey with the spirit of the spiritual quest right from the beginning till she achieves “the enlightenment.” She rebels against the traditional code of Muslim religion and leaves her home in search of spiritual existence. Like Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot, she rebels against social norms and craves for self-identity. There too she creates a problem with her rebellious thoughts and upsets her. When her uncle asks her to eat meat, she refuses and confesses that “I am a vegetarian, no one will make me eat slaughtered animals” (185). While staying in Paris, instead of purchasing Islamic books, she takes up oriental philosophy and increases her quest for god. By luck, above all, she comes across a troupe of Krishna Leela dance masters and joins them to learn the oriental classical dance. Finally, she learns it but doesn't feel satisfied as having a higher vision for a god. At last as a dance master, she comes to India, revolves around the ashrams, but doesn't feel comfortable, and she terms them as fake gurus. Encountering with all the places of a pilgrimage she finds her way to the Himalayas, and there she sees her vision through Prem Krishna, the embodiment of the spiritual world. The last journey she undertakes was full of spiritual symbols. Here she encounters lightening, rain, storm and the mountain peak which are aspects of her experiences in this journey. The culmination of her spiritual journey takes place when she becomes one with the elemental forces i.e. Prem Krishna. Significantly enough, the Prem Krishna who was formerly in the ashram has traveled the same path earlier and has become one with the universal spirit. Here Anita Desai writes about the experience of the mountain peak by Laila: “I had reached the mountain peak at that magic hour between day and night [- - -] and I asked myself: What will I meet here? Will Day come to meet my Night? [- - -]. At that moment the evening star appeared in the heavens and shone out from the deep blue of infinity” (298). Here the phrases ‘deep blue infinity’ and the ‘evening star’ have been the objects of Mother’s spiritual journey. Hereafter she is considered as the Shakti, Durga Mata, goddess of mountain, and divine force by Prem Krishna. In this way through multiple journeys, traveling in different places, she attains spirituality in the Himalayas through Prem Krishna, a universal spirit and hailed as a mother to everyone. Her struggles against the existing norms, traditions, and encounter with God, all happen in a rational and intellectual manner.

The next significant character who is involved in a quest for spirituality is Matteo, the only son of Italian parents. He is known for his intellectuality which makes him get rid of the school as he was bored with geometry and algebra. Through a tutor, he was given education at home where he gets attracted to the stories of the East. By reading Herman Hesse’s *Journey to the East* and *Siddhartha*, he desires to undertake a journey to the East and search for the truth. Accordingly, he starts alienating himself from the family and gets married to a journalist Sophie who is the daughter of German parents, known for her materialistic and practical manner. Matteo is considered to be dull, is dispassionate about materialism, and is involved in a quest for traditional ideas owing to which he decides to undertake a journey to

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India. He comes along with his wife and lands in Calcutta. They start their journey with certain plans, aspirations, and goals. Firstly they encounter with the ashram which is considered to be popular, but they feel dissatisfied with the ideas, but still, Matteo is compelled to know the hidden secret of the spirit. But he gets distracted by his wife who got vexed with this traditional comfort and asks him to leave for Goa. Accordingly, they go to Goa where Sophie enjoys her mundane life with drinking, swallowing marijuana, and other comforts but feels displeasure with these too after a short time. Matteo in Goa too encounters with the spirit of knowing the truth of God rather than enjoying the pleasures. They have encounters with different ashrams and fake gurus where they get bored and finally, they reach one ashram where they feel relieved. But by the time they reach Sophie comes to know that she is pregnant, owing to which they are rejected by that ashram and shown another ashram in the Himalayas where no religion, caste, creed, or other sentiments are followed. They reach there, which is considered to be final where Matteo gets involved with the ashram and comes across the mother whose aspirations are similar to his. But Sophie doesn't feel comfortable with the mother as she has preconceptions about the East that they perform some magic which is all superficial. She even calls mother wicked and later she gets out of it by leaving for Italy to escape from this mundane life.

After getting there too she doesn't get out of this quest for spirituality and the secrets behind the truth. She encounters the past of the mother by traveling to different places and comes to know the reality of her. By the time she comes to know Matteo falls ill, is admitted in hospital and returns to India with hidden past of mother and tries to reveal it to Matteo. But she comes to know mother has passed away and Matteo has followed the footsteps of the mother to get enlightenment in the Himalayas. Matteo also undertakes the same journey from the ashram to the mountain peak. Matteo's spiritual enlightenment is explained in the epilogue. His son Giacomo in Italy sees Matteo in the garden of his house in the form of Christ. Thus, the fulfillment of Matteo's spiritual quest is achieved by the novelist with the help of the epilogue. Finally, they both too attain spirituality by imitating mother and discover the truth which they consider as a universal spirit. Through this pertinence, the novel ends with the spiritual quest in India, where they undertake multiple journeys as the title suggests, an unexplored journey to India.

Through these three characters in the novel, Anita Desai projects the image of the spiritual quest by exploring three characters from three different regions which are western countries and their desire, passion in knowing the truth, and hidden reality about the East which they have considered to be an illusion for the Westerners. Desai through these characters explores the modernity idea of religion which can be a common ground for all the religions by breaking the social barriers, considered to be an idea of spirituality or the religion of humanity. The incomplete journey of Hugo "Baumgartner's Bombay" for his spiritual conquest comes to an end in the novel *A Journey to Ithaca*. The main protagonist of the novel

Laila breaks the social code and comes out of the clutches of caste, creed and a particular religion for attaining the vision of human life. Through the discussion above it is very clear that if one has to attain the modern idea, one has to encounter with the past. The same happens in the novel where the characters move from traditional idea to modern idea and they encounter with the past and attain the present and future.

#### Conclusion:

The journey undertaken by the three different characters at different planes with an intention in search of the root of spirituality is highly symbolic. It is symbolic because while depicting the conflict-ridden existence of these characters, Anita Desai is dealing with the predicament of the modern man caught in the contrived dialectical opposition between 'what is' and 'what ought to be.' The disintegrated and fragmented beings, Matteo and Laila's endeavor all through has been to attain the integration of being and wholeness of personality. Thus, in the novel, Desai symbolically presents the individual's pursuit for freedom and Truth that provide spiritual sustenance to the split self.

#### Endnotes:

1. William S. Sax, Helene Basu in *the law of possession: Ritual, healing and the secular state*.

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