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### Exploring Spirituality and Quest for Identity in Anita Desai's Novel Journey to Ithaca

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#### Abstract

Life is like a travelogue in which many twists and circumstances come. People look for their life's purpose during their entire journey through it. Some of them travel in search of wisdom and vision of life. The plot of Journey to Ithaca is comparable. The narrative of the people who had a great desire to achieve their goals is told in Journey to Ithaca. To achieve their goal, they gave up their riches. In this novel, Matteo, Sophie, and Laila set out on a voyage for various reasons. Matteo travels for peace, a spiritual quest, and enlightenment, and Sophie wants her husband Matteo back home because she thinks India is a place of sanctimonious people. Laila first wants freedom from her life and further follows the spiritual journey. Anita Desai portrays the spiritual beliefs of Indians in the Vedas and Upanishads. Hindu gurus and holy sites are references in Journey to Ithaca. Reaching peace, discovering meaning in the small things, and developing self-awareness through reflection are the three main goals of the journey of life, as portrayed in this novel.

#### Introduction

Humans are rushing to make more money in the modern world while ignoring some of the most important aspects of life's reality. As a result, most people experience emptiness and delusion in their life. Globalization and consumerism have proven detrimental to society, and these factors also contribute to stress and despair, disputes, and the breakdown of meaningful relationships. Journey to Ithaca portrays a similar situation in it. Desai has described the marital conflict, which extends to the different ideas of both husband and wife. The idea for the title of this novel, Journey to Ithaca, is taken from the poem Ithaca by C.P Cavafy. Cavafy pens, "Keep Ithaca always in your mind, arriving there is what you're destined for" (Cavafy 17). The poem tells us that experience is the most important in human life; that helps us to complete our journey. Despite claims that the novel is one of the world's most authentic tales, a critic like Jollyan writes that the novel has a greater degree of efficiency in presenting the notion of the truth and reality concerning society. He argues, "Throughout the book and the author describes how courageous protagonist is and how much she works for the rights of women. However, I didn't really see any evidence of this - as far as I could see Laila was driven by her selfish self-interest and nothing else. In fact, she comes across as a selfish and not very pleasant person" (Jollyan 94).

While discussing this novel, the book's first two characters are Matteo and Sophie, an Italian man and a German woman. Like the other couples in Desai's writings, they are dissatisfied with their marriage. However, in this case, the problem extends beyond temperamental compatibility. Matteo is ascetic and spiritual, unlike Sophie, who is practical. The novel is divided into six sections: a prologue, an epilogue, and four chapters. According to critic Philip Jameson, the novel has the following attributes: "The complex narrative structure, with layers of



flashback, quantum shifts of location, and recurrent imagery make this a book that repays re-reading. More importantly, Desai's exploration of the universal yearning for meaning in life is carried out with an intelligence, generosity and a total lack of pretension that make her book exceptional" (Jameson 91).

In the prologue, Sophie arrives at the hospital to see her husband and drives him home. The prologue starts with, "She was taken up the stairs to the upper floor and shown into the room where he lay on an iron cot, clothed only in pyjamas, and the upper half of his body emaciated and moist with perspiration. Sophie thought he must be dying" (Desai 1). The prologue explains how two children manage to live without their parents while they are away in India. Matteo seeks spirituality, while Sophie tries to convince him to return home. Desai mentions a confused sibling relationship in the prologue. Matteo struggles to establish himself in the eyes of others because he does poorly in his studies and is not very skilled in sports. Matteo's tutor introduces him to Herman Hesse's "The Journey to East," which motivates Matteo to travel to that region. Every person wants to establish their own identity in society. All the characters in this novel desire to discover their true identities and the universal human nature. However, their family prefers to steer them in a different, more civilised route. Every person's life eventually reaches a turning point when they discover how to achieve the inner truth. Matteo is weary of living on the support of his family to fulfil their expectations. The search for tranquillity eventually started in the location where he satisfied his quest to understand their eternal truth. The novel explores the spiritual condition of India. Spirituality is a connection of an individual to the inner spirit. Waaijman, a well-known critic of spiritualism from the 20th century, asserts that the standard definition of spirituality, "A process of reformation which aims to recover the original shape of man, the image of God. To accomplish this, the reformation is oriented at a mold, which represents the original shape: in Judaism the Torah, in Christianity Christ, in Buddhism Buddha, in the Islam Muhammad. In modern times spirituality has come to mean the internal experience of the individual. It still denotes a process of transformation, but in a context separate from organized religious institutions: spiritual but not religious" (Waaijman 87). On India's great land, people find a spiritual touch and shine in the world with knowledge of the holy Vedas and scriptures. Every person has their point of view on universal things. Whenever a less experienced person looks at worldly things, he seems superficial. To understand anything, it is necessary to have the desire to know the truth; without the desire to learn, man cannot make discoveries. Desai has presented in a unique way how positivity and negativity go simultaneously. Where there is positivity, one attains spirituality, the one who adopts negativity remains just a hypocrite. Sophie shivers from inside when she sees how superstitions grip people. People who need medical treatment are thronging the temples. Anita Desai has described the religious situation of India in two ways in this novel, one is the people who give birth to superstitions, and the other is the people who are the sign of true religious leaders, who hold the hand of the people and show the way of spirituality. Those who consider the holy Vedas and Upanishads as the basis of their spiritual knowledge make those Vedas the basis of their spiritual education. In this novel, less experienced Sophie considers Matteo's spiritual quest futile and persuades him to come home. When she sees religious leaders, she cannot understand their spirituality. "Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, makes one fearful. The master has told you not to feel guilty, not to feel ashamed, not to fear and not to be afraid. Open your hearts to love and light and the joy of living, he said, and so we turn our backs to religion" (Desai 110). Anita Desai dramatically presents here the conflict between beliefs existence of God. Matteo and Laila know that God exists and are on a journey to find God in the form of enlightenment. Sophie's words show that she does not support belief in spirituality, but internally she is different from her words. She is a virtuous wife like Indian women who have made a vow to the husband of her affection and preservation. Sophie is also like an Indian woman who wants to protect her husband. On the other hand, Matteo entirely devotes himself quest for enlightenment. According to him, spiritual pursuits require the essential quality of individual virtue. In pursuance of a spiritual quest, Matteo forgets his wife, Sophie, and his children, Giacomo and Isabel. Sophie desperately waits for Matteo. She knows she must fill the enormous emptiness of Matteo's absence, but she is helpless to persuade him to come home. She feels trapped in this place.

Giacomo and Isabel, born to Sophie and Matteo, are now under the care of their Italian grandparents. "The more happily the children settled into the life of their grandparent's home the more safe and secure and contented they became, the more she felt able to relax her fierce hold on them. It was as if the lioness who had guarded them so passionately earlier had now delivered them into a safe haven so that that zealous protectiveness dwindled" (Desai 174).

In this novel, Anita demonstrates an excellent vision where Sophie comes to know the Mother's reality. A curiosity evokes in Sophie about the ashram and the Mother. Through the Mother's life, she comes to know she

used to be the ordinary girl who wanted to discover herself and the eternal truth. Mother, born in Egypt, gained notoriety as a dancer when she was young. To obtain Supreme happiness, Leila learns to dance in Bombay. When Sophie learns about the Mother's past from an elderly man named Krishna, she discovers that Mother studied Indian dancing at the Krishna School of Dance in Bombay, who discloses, "I trained her. She was a child; she came to me for training. I taught her Indian dance. She had never seen Indian dance before...I was like a father to her. I took her everywhere—to Paris, Venice, New York-everywhere. But her in India...Here she began running after gurus. She said dancing was not for her, she wanted to live a spiritual life" (Desai 318).

Sophie discovers how Mother met her master, and he accepts her as his disciple. After the master's departure, she becomes the head of the ashram and is now known as The Mother. She does not believe in idol worship; she follows spirituality. She preaches to her disciple to open their hearts to love and feels the joy of loving. When Matteo is moving from one temple to another, he comes to know the impotence of a mentor to accomplish his incline of enlightenment and spiritual quest. The basis of the mentor-disciple relationship was the guru's knowledge, originality, moral strength, affection for his disciples, and selfless knowledge sharing. There was complete devotion to the tutor, faith in the teacher's ability, and dedication and obedience to the tutor. Besides it, the master defines guru-disciple relationships. In the Gita, Lord Krishna has described the mentor-disciple tradition as 'Traditional Yoga.' The basis of the guru-disciple custom begins with worldly knowledge. Its climax is the accomplishment of eternal spiritual bliss, also called God-realization and salvation. Spiritual mentors guide their disciples toward the truth of self-realization and God. A true Guru navigates his disciples through a respective direction of spiritual discipline. In this novel Anita Desai describes the guru's teachings; the sincere spiritual aspirant comes to understand the real purpose of life and the actual connection between oneself and the love of God illustrated by a self-realized guru. Matteo gets the spiritual knowledge after the death of respective Mother. He perceives his journey to spirituality. The work is replete with mystical imagery. the idea of a spiritual journey, the relationship between a spiritual pupil and his spiritual master, the process of giving up sensual pleasures and material life, the process of self-purification, and the process of achieving spiritual enlightenment by perseverance and hard labour. A feminist interpretation of the book is made by another critic, Eugene. She sees the work as an accurate portrayal of the sexism of women. The novel tempts the feminist critics with its exploitation of women. Eugene asserts a feminist tone in his argument. "It does not matter whether you are a feminist or not, if there is a crime committed against humanity then as a human being you have to seal the fate of the oppressor and feel and try to assuage the pain of the oppressed. But while many victims can be rescued, reinstated or taken care of, for the woman of the country. It's a whole different ball-game whatsoever" (Eugene 101). Anita Desai describes the human inner conditions in her novel "Journey to Ithaca" where humans find their final destination when their journey in search of spirituality ends in India among the Dharma Gurus. When humans lost their inner peace at that point a journey initial for peace.

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