



## ANITA DESAI'S JOURNEY TO ITHACA: A STUDY ON DIASPORIC JOURNEY

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### Abstract

*This study explores Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca (1995) as a significant contribution to diasporic literature, highlighting the complexities of reverse diaspora through the spiritual and physical migration of Western characters to India. Unlike conventional diasporic narratives that depict Indians abroad, Desai presents Matteo, Sophie, and Laila as seekers of enlightenment whose journeys embody themes of alienation, identity crisis, cultural displacement, and hybridity. The novel portrays India as a sacred land that attracts spiritual voyagers, while simultaneously exposing the challenges of cultural difference and psychological dislocation. Matteo embraces Indian spirituality and fulfils his quest, whereas Sophie initially resists, experiencing alienation and identity conflict before undergoing transformation into a seeker herself. Laila, who becomes the Mother, symbolizes the allure of India as a spiritual homeland and a guiding force for others. Through these intertwined journeys, Desai emphasizes that the essence of diaspora lies not in destinations but in the process of quest itself, where trials and tribulations ultimately lead to wisdom, self-realization, and inner awakening. The novel thus affirms the diasporic journey as a path toward identity, enlightenment, and spiritual fulfilment.*

**Key Words:** *Diaspora, Alienation, Identity, Nostalgia.*

Diasporic literature holds significant importance in contemporary English fiction. It portrays the journeys of displaced individuals and communities residing away from their native lands, concentrating on themes such as nostalgia, cultural identity, alienation, and hybridity. This literature highlights the coexistence of diverse cultures, the struggles faced by individuals, and the recollections of their homeland in foreign environments. As Dr. Poonam P. Joshi notes, —The most noteworthy aspect of the diaspora movement is the relocation‖ (Joshi, 2017, p.12). Diasporic studies capture the emotional effects of migration, feelings of rootlessness, experiences of loss, and the search for identity. In the opinion of Victor Ramraj,

*“Diasporic writings are invariably concerned with the individuals or community's attachment to the centrifugal homeland. But this attachment is countered by a yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode”. (Ramraj, 1996,p.216)*

Diasporic literature includes a diverse group of authors who focus on the postcolonial experience. Some of the prominent voices in diasporic studies are V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, JhumpaLahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, RohintonMistry, Uma Parameswaran, Meena Alexander, and Anita Desai. In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie skillfully portrays fragmented identities and memories. JhumpaLahiri explores the Indian American experience, emphasizing emotional displacement in the host country and cultural bridging. V.S. Naipaul's works investigate the colonial legacy and the complex nature of individual displacement. Bharati Mukherjee addresses the struggle for assimilation and the quest for identity in a new land. RohintonMistry highlights themes of memory and displacement in South Asian contexts. Diasporic studies enrich world literature by introducing fresh



perspectives, cultural hybridity, and an understanding of the complexities of migration and the evolving nature of transnational life.

Anita Desai, a South Asian diasporic writer, stands out as a significant contemporary figure in Indian English literature. She differs from other Indian women writers such as Ruth PraverJhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, NayantaraSahgal, Shobhaa De, ShashiDeshpande, and Kamala Das. Kamala Markandaya focuses on rural backgrounds in her works, while Ruth PraverJhabvala prioritizes social backgrounds over character development. NayantaraSahgal's novels emphasize social and political awareness, Kamala Das explores relationships between men and women, and physical desire is a central theme in ShobhaaDe's work. ShashiDeshpande's approach somewhat aligns with Anita Desai's, but Desai is distinct from other Indian women writers. Women are her protagonists, and she analyses their psychological crises with depth and realism.

'*Journey to Ithaca*', a novel by Anita Desai published in 1995, presents the concept of diaspora through the spiritual and physical migration of Western characters to India. This novel differs from typical diasporic literature, which often focuses on Indians migrating abroad. Instead, it explores –reverse diaspora|| or –expatriate|| experiences of Europeans seeking enlightenment in the East. The novel illustrates complex diasporic conditions through its three main characters. Key diasporic traits such as alienation, cultural hybridity, and fragmented identity are woven throughout the story. All three characters experience –existential rootlessness|| and absence of belongingness in their host country. Desai elegantly explores alienation, identity crises, and cultural hybridity within the alien land in this novel.

Desai, in *Journey to Ithaca*, engages with the motif of the journey for the first time. The diasporic movement depicted here extends beyond a physical passage; it represents a spiritual quest from Germany to India in search of self-discovery. Unlike the conventional migration from India to a host country, the novelist portrays a –reverse diaspora,|| where the return from an alien land to India becomes central. Within this framework, Ray's reflections on the journey acquire importance. He notes that –Journey has been used right from the days of Homer to symbolize man's spiritual quest|| (Rai, 1983, p. 98). In *Journey to Ithaca*, the narrative unfolds as a soul's path toward enlightenment, demanding effort and perseverance. The principal figures—Matteo, Sophie, and Laila,embody this theme, with Matteo beginning his religious journey from Germany to India.

*In Journey to Ithaca (1995) Desai examined the nature of pilgrimage to India through three characters, Mateo and Sophie, young Europeans, and Mother, a charismatic and mysterious woman, whose story is an earlier version of their own. (Priya, 2012, p.75)*

India has long been regarded as a sacred land, imbued with divine energy, where holiness is inseparable from spiritual pursuit. Matteo, born in Germany, emerges as a seeker of enlightenment. Laila—later transformed into –Mother||—describes this spiritual quest as –honey,|| declaring, –The honey made from the spiritual nectar, nectar to nourish your soul|| (Desai, p.118). The motif of spiritual quest forms the central theme of *Journey to Ithaca*. The characters here differ markedly from those in *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Unlike Hugo Baumgartner, who exists as a refugee in India, –Matteo and Sophie are travellers and remain travellers all through|| (Kurjekar, 2016, p.71). The novelist thus presents India through the perspective of outsiders. Each of the three journeys underscores the idea that value does not lie merely in the destination reached, but in the endeavour itself. The religious journeys



undertaken by Matteo, Sophie, and Laila are portrayed as more significant than the final goal, with the search for enlightenment outweighing the object of pursuit. To emphasize this theme, Anita Desai deliberately invokes C.P. Cavafy's poetry at the outset of her novel.

*"Then pray the journey is long  
Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind  
To arrive there is your ultimate goal  
But do not hurry the voyage at all  
Ithaca has given you a beautiful voyage" (C.P Cavafy,3).*

According to Anita Desai, —life is a continuous quest and also an unending journey of the diasporic consciousness (Kurjekar, 2016, p.71). The true beginning of the soul's journey is revealed only at the novel's conclusion. Matteo embarks on his diasporic journey with his wife Sophie, traveling from Germany to India. India, long perceived as a land of spirituality, radiates divine energy and has historically drawn seekers from the West. Humanity, in general, is compelled to undertake ceaseless journeys across different places in pursuit of new experiences. Even when such searches appear futile, the quest continues, driven by the desire for something elusive. Ultimately, some individuals arrive at the realization of truth, while many others wander across the universe in its pursuit.

Rai defines —Ithaca as *"Ithaca is back home or the celestial city"* (Rai, 1983, p.98) In this context A.K. Bachchan quotes,

—Journey to Ithaca is a journey where Ithaca ceases to be a specific place. Ithaca is the symbol of that unfailing beacon which eternally calls man to wander to be in quest of spiritual truth, heart's truth, a quest for reaching one's homeland, his inner self (Bachchan, 2004, p. 161).

Thus, the major characters in the novel – Matteo, Laila and Sophie – are on pilgrimage to Ithaca i.e. to the celestial city, to the lighthouse, to a beacon, which eternally calls man to wander to be in quest of spiritual truth. (Bhambar, 2010, p.184)

For Sophie, the journey with Matteo is far from a joyful experience; the passage from Germany to India becomes a form of torment. In an unfamiliar land like India, she suffers from cultural alienation. Sophie desires a conventional married life with Matteo, yet he is entirely different from her in temperament and aspiration. While Matteo seeks spiritual enlightenment, Sophie longs for stability. She sends their two children to live with their grandparents in the West, hoping they will have a better life there. Her jealousy toward Laila—later revered as —Mother—intensifies, as Laila draws Matteo away from her. Viewing India through the eyes of a foreigner, Sophie rejects Eastern philosophy and ridicules Matteo's spiritual vocabulary: —The Absolute, the soul, the Supreme Supra this and Supra that. Don't use these words, I am sick of them. They are non-words (Desai, p.143).

Upon her arrival, India appears to Sophie as a place of dust, dirt, and pollution, and Desai deliberately presents this negative image through the outsider's perspective. Matteo, however, stands in sharp contrast to Sophie. Their differences are rooted in culture—Sophie, German by birth, and Matteo, Italian—along with divergent temperaments, desires, and intentions. As a journalist, Sophie questions everything around her. Both arrive in India after marriage, but Sophie feels isolated and unable to integrate into Indian society. —Upon first reaching India, Sophie feels isolated from those who surround her (Chakravarty, 2004, p.37). She perceives herself as alone, unable to mingle with others, and thus



distances herself further. Through Sophie's experience, Anita Desai powerfully illustrates her diasporic condition and the complexities of identity and alienation. The novelist states,

“Her lack of the knowledge excluded her even when she was physically in such close contact that they could touch, even smell each other sharing the same earth for a bed” (Desai, 1995, p.50).

The use of foreign language is a barrier to community with others and it separates Sophie from Indians. In this connection Radha Chakravarty quotes,

—Language here is a marker of cultural difference. Elsewhere in the novel, it functions as the median through which Sophie finally comes to terms with her feelings about the Mother. Access to the private language of the diary brings not only understanding and tolerance but also enhanced self-knowledge. (Chakravarty, 2004, p.37).

Sophie's visit to India is reluctant, and the unending journey with Matteo leaves her exhausted. For Matteo, however, the passage from the West to India is effortless, as the place itself holds little significance compared to his spiritual purpose. His aim in coming to India is to satisfy a deep spiritual need. He embraces India wholeheartedly, moving from one ashram to another in search of a true guru. Along the way, he encounters several false guides who mislead him in different directions. Eventually, he meets the real Mother and chooses to remain in India. In doing so, Matteo accepts Indian culture, tradition, and spirituality as integral to his diasporic quest.

At last, Matteo's spiritual quest is fulfilled by attaining enlightenment due to the Mother.

—After the Mother's death the wheel turns for Matteo, giving way to another cycle of interrogation.

—Earlier the Mother was there to show him the external and essential truth (107). Now he has to make a pilgrimage to the place from where the Mother has enlightenment. (Chatterjee, 2008, p.2016).

The novelist tries to convey what spirituality is. It should not be insisted on others. “*Spirituality is a continuous journey, an odyssey, and it is an endless journey*” (Kurjekar, 2016, p.71).

In contrast to *Baumgartner's Bombay*, where the protagonist's journey remains incomplete, Matteo's religious quest in *Journey to Ithaca* reaches fulfillment. Sophie, however, suffers both physically and mentally from the prolonged travel. Unable to adapt to an unfamiliar country like India, she yearns for Germany. Her struggles are shaped by identity crisis and cultural displacement, which surround her and prevent her from integrating into Indian society. The host land appears confusing and alien to her. During the pilgrimage, she even witnesses the death of a child, experiences the atmosphere of hippie camps, and observes the Mother's hypnotic influence over her followers. Yet Sophie shows no interest in these aspects; instead, she seeks to uncover the hidden past of the mother.

In India, she sees people worship saints and even revere the silver footwear of sages, practices she dismisses as blind devotion. Matteo and his friend Pierre Edward, however, are deeply moved by the spiritual power of certain saints. Sophie, as a rationalist, rejects these experiences, insisting they are



nothing more than magic tricks. For Matteo, by contrast, the journey is a profound spiritual quest, one that defines his diasporic consciousness and shapes his identity.

—She is the skeptical, rational observer who cynically dismisses all ‘spiritual’ encounters as nonsense and seems as confined within her construction of reality as Matteo is. (Chakravarty, 2004, p.204).

Sophie continues her journey with the determination to uncover the true nature of the Mother. She travels rapidly across countries and continents—Egypt, Paris, Venice, New York, and Mumbai—collecting information about Laila, the Mother. In her pursuit, Sophie attempts to assert Western superiority over India, but her efforts ultimately prove futile.

Within diasporic literature, migrants often grapple with the question of belonging, which leaves them perplexed. Psychologically, Sophie too embodies this struggle. As a foreigner, she experiences the classic diasporic dilemma of identity crisis and repeatedly contemplates leaving India, unable to reconcile herself with the cultural alienation she faces. She says, to Matteo,

—When you are well, Matteo, we will leave. (Desai, 1995, p.4) and later, —couldn’t we stay in our own country? To die there? (Desai, 1995, p.57).

—Everything which is Indian nauseates her. But once she is in Italy she is not able to belong there. Sophie’s inability to relate to her own culture shows the complex diasporic condition. She longs for the accepted pattern of her culture but revolts against it. (Kurjekar, p.72)

She becomes victim of cultural alienation and isolation.

—Alienation leads to a sense of loss. It denotes an immigrant’s exile, relocating the sense of solitariness in a new atmosphere. (Joshi, 2017, p.27).

As a migrant, she is bewildered by alien culture. The new land frightens her and wants to leave India at once. She longs to go to Germany but Matteo refuses to accompany her. Sophie says to Matteo, I can’t here in this zoo. I want to go away. I want us to be ourselves. (Desai, 1995, p.53).

Thus, Sophie sees India through outsider’s eyes. She is unable to adjust herself with Indian society. Although Matteo does not give importance to places, Sophie gives much importance to places. —Sophie refused to eat in the veranda and went to sit on the steps behind kitchen where a pack of stray dogs lived and spitting then out to the steps. (Desai, 1995, p.77).

When Sophie hears about Matteo’s illness, she arrives India immediately and knows the unfortunate death of the ‘mother’ and Matteo’s departure from the ashram at once in search of spirituality.

—Sophie filled with the fire of spiritual height. She perceives the higher vision of love in her husband and the Mother Sophie is now determined to follow the ideal of Mother as a seeker, forgetting her children and parents and country. She collects that will power to follow the path of higher vision. Some inner enlightenment makes her submit to the higher motives of life. She begins to complete the journey. (Tondon, 2013, p.67).



Although Sophie endures cultural displacement and identity crisis, by the end of the novel she undergoes a profound transformation. She evolves into a seeker of enlightenment, coming to understand the meaning and purpose of pilgrimage—why individuals undertake such journeys and what they hope to achieve. Eager to share her realization, she intends to inform Matteo of her experience. However, upon hearing that Matteo has been hospitalized, she rushes to see him only to discover that he has already departed after learning of the Mother's death. Following the passing of his spiritual guru, Matteo ascends into the mountains to continue his pursuit of spiritual fulfillment.

Laila, meanwhile, is portrayed as a voyager who leaves her native land and settles in India with her dance troupe. Over time, she transforms into the Mother, a spiritual guide and a powerful source of inspiration for her devotees. Through her, Desai illustrates the complexities of diasporic identity and the allure of India as a spiritual homeland.

—Laila starts her diasporic journey as a spiritual quest|| (Vaidya,2014,p.166)

—Anita Desai wards off her diaspora by showing her indeterminate characters at the journey period and looks at the positive side of the voyage.||

The narrative is rich with journeys that transform emotional struggles into spiritual quests, rendering them meaningful and complete. These journeys lead the characters toward an awareness of the present and its possibilities. Through this process, they attain bliss, wisdom, enlightenment, and transformation—each experience opening the path to further quests and deeper realizations.

—Thus the novel presents a hope for mankind's regeneration through self analyzing process, and affirms that the most signifying and satisfying experience is the journey itself. It may be full of difficulties, trials and tribulations but it is worth the trouble. Thus, this diasporic journey fills the characters with wisdom, knowledge and enlightenment not known to them before. Each experience is unique in itself as we do not know what destiny has in store for us. One ought to dive deep into our own consciousness to find the riches within. Ithaca cannot give external riches to everyone but it can certainly pave way for inner direction. The discourse thus marks a continuous shifting, wandering away from the golden past towards the promised future. The analogy fits India well enough. (Kurjekar,2016,p.73)

In the realm of spiritual life, renunciation holds a central place. One who seeks the divine surrenders to the Almighty, relinquishing worldly attachments in the pursuit of enlightenment. Sophie comes to recognize these truths in the later stage of her journey, realizing that spiritual fulfilment requires sacrifice, detachment, and a transformation of identity beyond cultural alienation and diasporic displacement.

—It come to her that in her search for the Mother she is abandoning them (her children) as much as Matteo had abandoned her in his search, and that in following her she is entering an area of the chill, bleak bitterness of renunciation (Desai,1995,p.247)||

In the concluding part of the novel, the novelist shows the unexpected transformation of Sophie through the dialogue between Diya and Sophie.

—Daya asks. —Where did you go, Sophie?||



Sophie says: ‘I went on a long journey. I went to find out the truth about the Mother.

–What did you find?’ whispers Diya.

–Nothing, much.

–It doesn’t matter,’ Diya comforts her. ‘Not a bit.’

–I suppose not.

–They are both silent for such a long time, they might have fallen asleep. But then, Diya is heard whispering again. ‘What will you do now, Sophie?’ she asks. ‘Will you follow him?’

–Sophie is lying as still as a stone, with an arm across her eyes, thinking in the dark of that first pilgrimage she went on in India that had ended in the death of a child. Now she knows why the Mother went on the pilgrimage, why anyone goes on pilgrimage and why she must go too. She says in a flat voice, ‘I have to,’ and adds, ‘what else’ (Desai, 1995, 9.305)

–Man can’t reach his Ithaca unless his inner self is awakened. At the end Sophie’s inner self was awakened and so she decided to follow the path of her husband who was her self-fulfillment. The essence of Indian spirituality that the Mother upholds and Sophie and Matteo realize at the end, stresses on the journey within – Know Thyself. Desai has skillfully intertwined quest for travel and self-fulfillment in the novel *Journey to Ithaca*. In this way, Desai’s novel *Journey to Ithaca* is simultaneously a travel book and also a description of spiritual journey to one’s inner essence i.e. self-fulfillment. (Akila, 2013, p.22)

Sophie ultimately chooses to follow in Matteo’s footsteps, and her desire is fulfilled in an unexpected and unusual way. As Joshi observes, ‘Diaspora is a voyage towards self-realization, self-recognition, self-knowledge and self-definition’ (2017, p.13). In *Journey to Ithaca*, Sophie—the central character—achieves all of these through her diasporic journey. In this context, her transformation illustrates how the search for identity and the overcoming of alienation are inseparable from the spiritual dimension of the diaspora experience.

Rama Kundu quotes in his article, ‘Journey to the East Once Again’ observes:

–In Desai’s novel too Ithaca means home but home in a very different sense, which is almost like homelessness. It is like homecoming but without the promise of domestic comfort, hearth and family... It is the home for long wandering long suffering searching soul. –(Kundu, 280)

–Thus, *Journey to Ithaca* is a spiritual journey to one’s inner self. The Journey gives wisdom and knowledge, which are two great things which we have to inculcate in our self. The journey, is important and it is far beyond any material pursuit. This is beyond everything. Thus, we can conclude by saying that this diasporic experience leads to self identity, discovery of a self, which leads to salvation for the inner self. So, this journey brings into limelight inner spiritual truths which are very joy giving and blissful and this transformation is self – manifesting and peace giving for Matteo as well as Sophie and they brought out the proposal that journey gives a new sense to one’s life. (Komal Rakwal & Neeru Sharma, 2014, p.241)

To conclude, Anita Desai masterfully portrays the diasporic journeys of the three central characters in *Journey to Ithaca*. Their paths are marked by trials, hardships, and tribulations, yet the religious quest



ultimately reaches fulfilment by the novel's end. These journeys enrich the characters with wisdom, knowledge, and enlightenment, making the experience unique in its essence. Ithaca, as envisioned by Desai, does not promise worldly pleasures; instead, it offers spiritual awakening and guides the seekers toward a more profound and prosperous future.

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