

A STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN *JOURNEY TO ITHACA*

Swati Mustaphi

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Dr. Kanailal Bhattacharya College, Howrah -711104

ABSTRACT

Anita Desai's narrative method, which is the primary focus of study here, employs the antithetical technique. In this technique, Desai skillfully compares and contrasts the two worlds – the inner world of her protagonists and the outer world of the rest of the characters.

The objects, scenes, characters, all exist in the novel as image figures to objectify and dramatize the protagonists' point of view. Desai's creation of meaningful images serves the purpose of making the abstract concrete. Her images and image scenes serve as formal analogues for a private world. The purpose of the present study is to analyse her technique – point of view, use of images, rhetoric and the special importance she lays on nature.

Since the early days of European colonial expansion India has continued to fascinate the Western mind, either as materially alluring, or as imaginatively enhancing with its exotic culture and natural beauty, or as spiritual succor for the soul satiated by excessive material accumulation. It may be interesting to note how the motif of journey appears to have dominated major literary works on the theme of India. *A Passage to India* and *The Razor's Edge* are some of the major examples. Journey motif as archetype appears to reflect a universal mental pattern that has been operating since the days of primitive society and is expected to continue as a recurring narrative design in the journey motif in her novel *Journey to Ithaca* (1995).

Making a departure from the Desai canon, *Journey to Ithaca* introduces a different style and a different subject than what has kept the author preoccupied so far. No questions of feminism, identity or racial problems seem to surface here or even the intricacies of personal relationships, which is her forte. What keeps the author preoccupied here is the idea of a persistent journey, something like the concept of 'ananta yatra' that is predominant in Indian Philosophy. In a way, *Journey to Ithaca* may be described as a story of multiple journeys undertaken by many people at

many different planes of existence. These travelers are like so many pilgrims – one lighting his/her torch from another's torch and giving the same to some other sojourner in his/her turn.

All of Matteo, Sophie and Laila undertake a literal and metaphorical 'journey to the East'. Ithaca is but an evocative mythical place name that stirs associations or memories of a long – lost home, the tired sojourner's yearning for it, as well as the joy of homecoming at last. In the novel Ithaca means home but home in a very different sense, this is almost like homelessness. It is a homecoming, but without the promise of domestic comfort, hearth and family. Neither India nor Ithaca is imagined as a geo-political entity here, but they become the same, one merging into the other. It is the home for a long wandering, long-suffering, and searching soul. The search for a home, which is related to the other search for identity, is a common theme in much modern writing. However, here home is also part of the road, and the long journey towards this home – with all its dangers and distractions – is only desired. Early in her youth, Laila had crept into an Oriental Bookshop in Paris and had casually opened a heavy volume to stumble upon the lines of the Rig-Veda: "There is no happiness for him who does not travel" (Desai 196).

The novel begins with an extract from a poem the starting line of which is a prayer that the journey may be long. Though Ithaca is to be kept "fixed in mind", and "to arrive there is your ultimate goal", the poet advises: "...do not hurry the voyage at all/it is better to let it last for long years" may be for life. By citing the poem, the author seems to suggest that what is important is not the reaching, the arrival at the home-port, but rather the journey itself. Ithaca seems to be an idea that operates on the matter as a continual source of inspiration. Thus, what he achieves is "a beautiful voyage"; though Ithaca has little to offer her, she leads one through "so much experience" to "great wisdom"; "with such great wisdom you have gained", "You must surely have understood...what Ithaca means". It may also be just the name of a dream as well, an illusory ideal that might remain elusive forever.

There are a number of ironic parallels, operating as leitmotif to the main tune or motif that is, journey – home – India. Thus the children of Matteo and Sophie pretend that they are "only acting a play...about India (Desai 10); they represent the juvenile approach to India which characterize many an adult; the children mimic the elders in their game of Buddha worship or peacock dance. However, India also gives them a sense of belonging: "I was born there"(Desai 13) the child would say as if it was proud; its mother on the other hand, finds any suggestion of India repelling. She wants to shut India out from her consciousness: "I know nothing about India"(Desai 73), she would empathically

declare, perhaps because her only child has been snatched away by India, Dr. Bishop, who leads a clean, simple, peaceful life, had come to India, as a missionary to serve her God and the people, is a serene and persistent traveler, without any home of her own, or any fixed place of job, but with no complain against anybody or anything. In contrast, the drug addicts, who had crowded the Goa beach, in the seventies, found India to be a horrible place. Their India “might have been scenes from nightmare or a picture of hell” (Desai 73). They are in a life with Paolo who is wistful about India only because he imagines it to be a haven for drug and sex (Desai 154). Mrs. Du Best, the American lady who imports ethnic cultures, had always wanted to go to India, but never did. She prefers the Indian of books and arts, but not the real one that seems to her “a form of death”.

Desai’s unequivocal rejection of the Western religious ethos of sin - evil – guilt – penance may have raised many an elitist eyebrow. Laila once throws away the crucifix in the conviction that she did not need “so ugly and so sad...an image of sin and suffering” (Desai 291). Later the mother teachers, “...we have no religion which scolds” (Desai 98) The Mother addresses her devotees as friends whom she assures, “the only purpose of our existence here (is) to experience fully, to be fully (Desai 100) and, as Matteo listens to the Mother, he experiences “the revealing of a great luminous bloom” (Desai 99).

Not that Desai accepts like Forster, the “muddledom” of India as well, including its orthodoxies, superstitions and other darker sides. But her awareness of the joyous participation that is at the core of Indian Philosophy lends to her novel a quality that is not generally found in the Western occidentalists’ perception of India or in that of modern Westernized Indian elites.

Matteo wonders, “over there (the West) people do not know there is a mystery” (Desai 58). It is this mysterious essence of existence that the author tries to capture and it is here that her novel differs from those written by Western authors on the subject. There has been an element of bewilderment in the Western attempt at understanding India; India continues to be a profound mystery to their perception that it remains not only difficult but also impossible to define this in concrete literary terms. In this novel, Desai’s attitude has changed and evolved remarkably, where she exploits her mixed heritage to achieve something unique. Her empathies are with the Western search for India; at the same time, she attains a harmonious, clear vision of India, a sense of delighted joyous and serene fulfillment.

In tune with this vision, it is a relaxed narration without linear progress and with a playful

crisscrossing into different segments of time. Compared to Desai's other books it seems unlyrical, unimpassioned, almost in bare style, and noticeably free of the tensions and despair that usually overpower her personae. The treatment has been determined by the quality of her vision. Though Desai has unsparingly pointed out the orthodoxies of Hindu society, she goes beyond this to capture the essence of Vedantic Hinduism – the quintessential message of joy – light – truth. The Mother's advice to Matteo may be understood in this light: to be like a lotus flower, which is not wetted by water or stained by mind (Desai 138). The myth of Odysseus' journey and his Ithaca has stirred poetic imagination across time and space. In Desai's novel, the myth receives a fresh treatment and acquires newer significance. Ithaca ceases to be a specific place, namely, Ulysses' long – lost and long – cherished homeland. Ithaca in Desai's novel is the symbol of that unfailing beacon which eternally beckons man to wander, to be in quest of the heart's truth, a quest for reaching one's homeland and man's true homeland is his inner self. Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* is about one's journey within oneself, a journey which ends mostly in India, because India is the only land which recognizes the significance of the journey within a land which is less a land and more a thought, a vision, a philosophy that stresses the truth of the search within. In Desai's novel, Ithaca, the symbol of meaningful goal, merges into India. *Journey to Ithaca* is indeed an apotheosis of the real Indianised vision of life.

The point above becomes clear when in reply to Sophie's exasperated question, "I want to know why we are here", Matteo answers that it is only in India that it is possible to understand the mystery. He says, "Over there people don't even know there is a mystery... There are people – sages – to guide you. I need such a person (Desai 58). Right from the beginning he is ready for a 'sign' and is sure of a design. It was Matteo's faith that right from the beginning there was a design, a pattern to his sojourns. At every turn, he seemed to be shown signs, given directions, drawn further and taken deeper. Thus from Hotel Monaco begins his designed journey. It is as if by design he meets Pierre Eduard, a sort of collector of saints. The first Indian saint Matteo and Sophie meet lived in a squalid suburb in Bombay, through merchants' quarters and shady narrow alleys, through cigarette and narrow soda – water stalls. A grey haired woman sat in a thick, cloudy atmosphere. In a room filled with the smells of perspiration of hair oil, of spicy fried food and suddenly "the conflicting, noisy and obstreperous odours that had early filled the room" were swept by a surge of fragrance of flowers – "tuberoses, spider lilies, jasmine and roses"(Desai 39) . Though Pierre Eduard cries "Miraculous! Miraculous!" and Matteo is under the impression of being swept with another sign.

Sophie asks the right question – why should one come to India for party tricks and magic shows which are in abundance in Europe. This is the fake mask of spirituality, the sign of power of the divine that has often deluded many naïve believers in India. Then come a series of similar miracles that are depicted by the author as images of the Westerner’s vision, cheap miracles that are the masks hiding the real India. One has to work out one’s salvation through a rigorous process and in order to be initiated into this process; Matteo takes refuge in an ashram. For Sophie it was a place to be trapped. Sophie finds it a threatening menace: “all the crows in Bombay seemed to have gathered to huddle” complaining and crowing against their fate. The crow image is of crucial significance in the novel. During the monsoons the “crows maddened her with their cries...giving extra loud caws of indignation and outrage”(Desai 45) · Later when Laila comes over to India and is trapped in the stultifying atmosphere of a throttling cage – like flat in Bombay, under the threat of extinction and the spell of fake Krishna, she too finds the cacophony of the crows maddening her: “outside black crows are fighting and screaming...they swoop upon (garbage)...they frighten me so”(Desai 275) . The crows are a symbol of a jarring menace of a destructive kind that these threatening crows can only be silenced when the inner journey is complete, when one returns to his inner state of peace and calm. This happens with the Mother who, while giving her spiritual discourse, sees the crows during evening setting on the branches of trees atop and around her, and yet not one crow cawing for a moment. Crows therefore take up an additional symbolic dimension, signifying the discordant cawing within man. Once the truth, the enlightenment is achieved, the crows can be silenced.

It is to silence the crows within that Matteo joins the ashram. There is nothing worth mentioning in the first experience except the initiation into a mechanically routinized community life – taking food along with other disciples etc. The images of the crowded evening sessions were thronged by families who brought along sick relatives. This again is an image of fake religion; truth does not deal with bodily disease. Truth is about curing magic itself.

Sophie with her typical Eurocentric vision of India cannot fathom the meaning of such a fate. She therefore leaves the ashram and joins a band of European freaks in Goa, smoking marijuana. She nearly loses contacts with Matteo. Instead of the pilgrims who chanted ‘Hari, Hari, I pine for Thee.’ their community chanting is about realization of Hari through drugs:

Take a puff, take a puff

Feel yourself disappear.

Hare Krishna, Hare Rama

Hare Krishna, Hare Rama. (Desai 59)

Yet, however much Sophie immersed herself in her puffs she could not dissolve herself from the awareness of agony and shame, “Sometimes she cried herself...and seemed to be lying in a spreading pool of her own excrement...quite shamefully.”(Desai 100) . The tryst with marijuana being over, again Matteo is joined by Sophie, who once again starts another journey to another ashram in Bihar. Thereafter, in all their journeys, Matteo and Sophie encounter the fake mask of the Truth. The real face is only revealed to Matteo once he journeys north and finds the Mother’s ashram. His very first experience as he enters is significant. He discovered an elemental harmony to different from the crows earlier, “Birds called to each other in ringing voices.” This immediately places him in his childhood ambience, and he is thus symbolically placed in his second childhood home. His first encounter with the Mother is epiphanic. Truth comes to him in the form of bliss. He realizes that the mystery he has so long been searching for is essentially an experience of bliss – “anandam anandam anandam kevalam” as the Upanishads have stressed. The Mother’s discourse is extremely crucial in understanding the significant part. According to her the purpose of life is to ‘feel,’ to experience bliss’ a bliss that comes with a sense of being loved: “It is not like going to the church...Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, makes one fearful...open your hearts to love and light and the joy of loving.” This is one of the most revealing statements about the ‘mystery.’ the truth that journeymen to Ithaca – India find anchorage in. Matteo is immediately absorbed into the life of the ashram. Here it is a community of bliss, selfless love and joy. Matteo is deeply immersed in his role first as washerwoman in the kitchen sink, then as the letter – writer for the Mother and finally in charge of the new publication unit. When Sophie comes to India after her childbirth, she is still cynical. She considers the Mother as a large mother spider in whose web are caught small flies like Matteo to be engulfed and destroyed forever. Nevertheless, Matteo has comprehended the essence of the hard work that all the ashramites put in, “She teaches us to work without desiring the fruit from that work. Isn’t that a higher way of life?” Yet Sophie’s point of view prevents her from identifying the real nature of bliss. For her work is “work and should bear fruit...if it doesn’t bear fruit it doesn’t serve its purpose.” Therefore, her point of view is the western materialistic point of view. Matteo seems to have

plunged into the genuine Indianized goal of work for the world by an obliteration of personal goals, goals that prevent one from embarking on a glorious journey to Ithaca. Sophie wants a palpable comprehension of the truth with a rational explanation. Her mind is like that of the child who must have a scientific explanation, who “pulls a butterfly to bits so that it can see what makes it fly.” Matteo is in the process learning to drown his ego, to allow experiences to happen, to be on the receiving end, to appreciate the graces of total surrender. He gradually learns to stop smuggling. The Mother’s message guides him:

You know the saint Ramakrishna said we should be like

Kittens – allow the master to pick him up and carry you.

Don’t struggle, don’t resist. The Master, the Mother – they

Are the mother cats, they will carry you, the kittens.

The dyke therefore breaks between Sophie and Matteo’s vision and she finds “Matteo had vanished in the heart of the world that remained shutting to her.” In the search of scientific explanation, she ultimately creates a quizzical myth of suspicion round the Mother’s past. Meanwhile Sophie has her second child within the “Abode of Bliss,” meets Dr. Bishop who delivers her child in the hospital, finds the doctor immersed in his missionary goal for which he too had undertaken a long journey from home. However missionaries cannot attract her and she leaves the ashram to go back home.

Sophie’s moment of revelation comes when one morning suddenly in her walk she finds the Mother seated on a small stool without her voluminous pink robes, looking essentially fragile, a small shrunken creature slightly growing bald. To her astonishment she finds a grand image of a host of peacocks and peahens dancing in front of her. While the peahens were being fed by her, the peacocks displayed a thousand individual fans of brilliant bronze – like greens, blues and gold’s, displaying their glories with a preening expression of vanity. She felt that the peacocks in the explosion of colourful magnificence were dancing a pageant of obeisance to her – “this display that was their tribute to her ...surreal to Sophie in this landscape of silence and solitude.” Sophie is deeply engrossed by this image of phenomenal beauty and pride bowing at the feet of the Mother. In spite of her scientific frame of mind, the paradoxical nature of this image stayed within her. She keeps this epiphany a secret, but this secret unconsciously ravishes her. This is evidently proved from her reactions to the world outside the ashram, as and when she leaves it for Europe. One she leaves the ashram to seek freedom and individual independence refusing to be a silly fly caught in the spider’s web, she feels

the real outer world thrusting 'itself at her like blow from its fists'. The real world appears in all its sinister manifestations, in its menace, squalor, poverty and unconcealed lust: "if she had hated the ashram, Mother, Matteo and their lives there, it was nothing she now felt, compared to the hate she felt for the world outside." The sense of escape to freedom and self – assertion have entirely dissipated to be replaced by a bitter sense of loss and betrayal. Once out of it, Sophie realizes how the serenity and calm of the ashram life and unconsciously ravished her mind. She reaches home in Frankfurt but finds no roots in it. She is an alien in her own 'home.' She resents her father's reticence and her mother's voluble expression of solicitation. The final blow comes when her children would be baptized. She had earlier refused to name her child after the Mother's wishes as Prem – Krishna and instead had christened him 'Giacomo.' She now revolts at the protest of baptizing her own children in the Christian tradition:

No, I did not leave India and all its superstitions and rituals to come here and submit to the tribal rites of Europe...you believe a baby should be dumped in a basin of water by a priest and have some mumbo – jumbo said over its heads or it won't go to heaven, eh?

She leaves her home and goes over to Italy to Matteo's home with her children. She did not talk about India at all and yet she was obsessed with Matteo "who came surging back in a way she had not imagined would happen ...The Mother, the ashram – images of them rose to haunt her. She saw the ring of dancing peacocks, the old woman in their centre." Matteo had been the cause of pain of all the years in India but now, away from him she felt even more haunted by Matteo's presence and also experienced the unconscious presence of the Mother. Family, there is her most crucial rejection of Christianity as a means of salvation.

The third character that becomes rebellious like other heroines of Anita Desai for her spiritual quest in India. Spending her childhood in Alexandria, she is educated in Paris and Venice and finally comes to India for her spiritual emancipation. Laila as a Muslim girl revolts against her parental religion and endures the panics of life in her search for godhead, first in Paris and then in India. As a dancer, she fails, but as a seeker after truth, she succeeds in fulfilling the final goal of her life. There are two women who revolt in this novel against their surrounding: Sophie and Laila. Sophie longs for worldly freedom while Laila aspires for spiritual freedom. As a rebellious daughter of Alma and Hameed, she

exhibits “an amber of curiosity.” Since her early childhood, her curious nature makes her give up “all orthodox religious.”

As the novelist analyses the psychic depth of the characters, her language tends to be situational and contextual. For example, the conversation between Sophie and Matteo becomes a good piece of symbolic and psychological language. Matteo as a seeker after truth finds two kinds of paths while reading the story of Katha Upanishad: the path of joy and the path of pleasure. The linguistic meaning of these two words for Sophie is more or less the same. She seems awe – stricken when Matteo distinguishes the linguistic properties of these two words:

Sophie’s lips felt dry and she spoke through those dry lips hoarsely, ‘I can’t understand what you mean. The path of pleasure, the path of joy. To me they are the same, they are not the separate. But I see that you are saying I am the fool, the one who takes the path of pleasure and that you are the wise one.

Sophie expresses her contempt towards other people in the ashram through non – verbal language. She does not like to give up her European identity among the ashramites in India. So she does not try to understand the mystical yet the false language of the people at the ashram. She excludes from the environment of the ashram due to the “lack of the language.” She rather tries to understand the language of birds and animals through their gestures and motions but ignores willingly to understand the language of the people of the ashram. She is an example by which Sophie comprehends the language of the animals through sound:

The pai dogs that barked in the village and in other villages, plaintively or aggressively, pleasingly or even conversationally as though addressing each other over great distance in the dark were more comprehensible to her, she listened to their dialogue with greater understanding and sympathy. Once she was certain she heard a pack of jackals howling, as early as wolves and this roused the dogs to frenzy: she felt their fear in her own veins.(Desai 53)

The phrases “jackals howling” as eerily as wolves” and “the dog to frenzy are indicative of Sophie’s mental turmoil. The fear in her conscious mind creates the fear in her unconscious mind. The animal image haunts her like a psychosis patient. She thus becomes nightmarish and sees her new – born babe as a snake,

Like an expert linguist, Desai distinguishes between native and non – native varieties of English. Sophie, as an ashramite does not understand the regional pronunciation of English. Even Matteo hears a woman speaking the typical regional variety of English:

She was speaking very slowly and clearly, enunciating each word very precisely almost as if it were lesson ion elocution, but it took Matteo sometime to make out that she spoke in English, for her voice and accent sounded so Indian in its pronunciation of ‘ds’ and ‘ts’ rolled ‘rs’ and heavy emphasis on the first syllable.(Desai 74)

The different images used in the novel make the language symbolic and suggestive. The images like “the graveled path”, “dust-filmed glass,” “a velvet tassel,” “a cream-flecked smile” prepare the foreground for narrative pattern. Sophie uses the image of “a monster spider” for the Mother and for her spinning web to catch “these silly flies.” The images like “breast like a sword” and an “an invisible crevice” are functional for they reveal the hidden and interior regions which are beyond the purview of any written language.

Desai in *Journey to Ithaca* has thus united varied groups of people from different parts of the world in order to present a cosmic vision of life and reality. The spiritual journey of Hugo in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* for his spiritual quest comes to its completion in *Journey to Ithaca*. The novel ends with a hope for humanity’s regeneration through the process of self – analysis. This novel carries the idea of internationalism a step further. The protagonists belong to diverse cultures, such as Italy, Germany, Egypt and India. The narrative spans several continents.

The novel emphasizes the fluidity of linguistic and cultural boundaries, signaling the impossibility of fixing identity in easily definable categories. Intertextuality becomes a dominant feature, within the narrative as well as in the epigraphs drawn from Cavafy, Lorca and Kundera. Allusions to Herman Hesse, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Tagore and Toru Dutt jostle with references to the Kama Sutra, Hindu religious chants, and passages from the Rig – Veda and translated lyrics from popular Hindi film music.

Though the text is primarily in English, most of the characters are multilingual. Matteo, growing up in Italy, is forced to take lessons. Laila, as a child in Alexandria in Egypt, must learn French in school. Everywhere is found a mingling of tongues, the impossibility of keeping languages entirely separate in today's world.

Journey to Ithaca may easily be mistaken for an Orientalist text, one that seeks to exoticize India n by objectifying it and rendering it opaque to the Western imagination. Such a reading, would however, assume that the perspective of the fictional protagonists coincides with that implicit in the narrative voice. Desai here actually employs multiple perspectives that mutually critique one another, to establish the elusiveness of 'truth'. In this process of dual critique, Desai's use of multiple languages proves a very effective tool. Language functions as very effective marker of cultural difference. It also functions as a medium 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.

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