

Orientalism in Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca

Madhavi Solankurkar

Rajarshi Shahu Arts and Commerce College, Rukadi, Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Famous mythologist Devdatta Pattnaik in one of discourses says that the Vedas and the Upanishadas are the seed of Hindu philosophy and the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the fruit. The seed is dry and has no Ras i. e. taste but to make the people digest the seed, the fruit has been created in Hindu pantheon. The Ramayana, the Gita and the Upanishada are revered as the celebration of ideals in all walks of life, and especially in human relationships, creating paragons of personalities: parents-children, fathers-sons, husbands-wives, brothers-sisters, masters-servants, guru-shishya, ruler-ruled, friendships, and so forth. These all time great philosophies present life in its stark and naked realities full of faults and foibles, avarice and animus, trickery and stratagem, duplicity and diplomacy, lust and lechery, selfishness and sacrifice, retribution and retreat, temptations and machinations, conspiracies and candidness, and in fact the very way humans live and love, hate and kill: warts and all, so to say. These philosophies have established living and lasting traditions that have been closely relevant to all ages and times to date. One is aware that despite piles on piles of scholarly interpretations, critical commentaries, artistic adaptations and countless creative engagements, the two epics still remain inexhaustible, finding their reflections and refractions, imitations and images in all literatures of India, including Indian Writing in English. Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca presets the philosophy of spirituality in the fictional form and the present paper is concerned with that.

KEYWORDS: spiritual enlightenment, path of liberation, oneness of Man and God, spiritual journey, etc.

The oriental philosophy has attracted the attention of both the writers from the East and the West. Many writers from all over the world depict the oriental philosophy in one way or the other. It is because the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Gita transcend the description of mere classic or classical literary texts. They are the very well-springs of unfailing and everlasting inspiration; they are an ever-shining beacon light for artists, writers, for the historians, for the critics and the exegetists as also for the nondescript common man in this country. We have learned our philosophy, our morality and ethics, our aesthetics, manners, mores and etiquette, -- and as a matter of fact, -- a whole way of life from these very writs. For the man of letters they are the fountainheads of archetypes of myth, allusion, form, motif and idiom, irrespective of the mind-boggling diversity of details of cultures and languages across this vast and ancient land of ours. They are our breath and lifeblood that have guided and sustained us over ages together, through our ecstasies and agonies, triumphs and failures, hopes and despairs, and have always shown us the right way of life when emergencies emerged. Famous mythologist Devdatta Pattnaik in one of discourses says that the Vedas and the Upanishadas are the seed of

Hindu philosophy and the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the fruit. The seed is dry and has no Ras i. e. taste but to make the people digest the seed, the fruit has been created in Hindu pantheon. The Ramayana is revered as the celebration of ideals in all walks of life, and especially in human relationships, creating paragons of personalities: parents-children, fathers-sons, husbands-wives, brothers-sisters, masters-servants, guru-shishya, ruler-ruled, friendships, and so forth. On the other side, the Mahabharata presents life in its stark and naked realities full of faults and foibles, avarice and animus, trickery and stratagem, duplicity and diplomacy, lust and lechery, selfishness and sacrifice, retribution and retreat, temptations and machinations, conspiracies and candidness, and in fact the very way humans live and love, hate and kill: warts and all, so to say.

These two epics along with the Gita and the Upanishada have established living and lasting traditions that have been closely relevant to all ages and times to date. One is aware that despite piles on piles of scholarly interpretations, critical commentaries, artistic adaptations and countless creative engagements, the two epics still remain inexhaustible, finding their reflections and refractions, imitations and images in all literatures of India, including Indian Writing in English. To explore all these reflections and engagements is an impossible venture. Even so, it is my effort to revisit the depths of these icebergs with reference to Journey to Ithaca through the present paper.

Journey to Ithaca is full of oriental philosophy. It speaks about the five elements about which there is detailed discussion in the Ramayana, the Gita, the Upanishada and the Mahabharata. Anita Desai has put forth her vision of spirituality in the novel but the basic philosophy of spirituality is taken by her from these two great epics. Her perception about dance and music as the medium through which one can achieve the enlightenment, her belief in the elemental forces like storm, rain, lightening, river and the mountain peak where the culmination of her spiritual journey takes place reflect her thorough knowledge of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Gita. Journey to Ithaca is also full of the philosophy of the guru-shishya philosophy which is the core of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The ultimate driving force behind this universe has been a matter of puzzle, ambiguity, complexity and mystery for mankind. Right from the days of Vedas people have witnessed a power that has manifested itself in nature. It is in the form of moving stars and planets and in the form of five elements – Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Sky. It is manifested in the blooming flower and sweeping storms alike. Both the sides good and evil have been inherent in that unknown force. On one hand the scientists in this world have been making constant efforts to understand the exact nature of this universal force – the ultimate reality, and on the other the poets and saints have been making efforts to understand the ultimate reality by way of intuition and by the effort of trying to establish communion with the almighty spirit. Human mind aspires for the liberation. The state of liberation is called ‘Nirvana’ in Buddhism. The Buddhist philosopher says that ‘Nirvana’ is the highest life of purity, perfection and bliss. We aspire for permanent happiness, security and bliss. Human mind is such that it runs after the agencies which offer tangible solution with gratification. G. Galloway opines, “Religion is a spiritual process and the secret of its nature and growth cannot be found in the outward world, but in the human soul itself.” (Deshpande, 1978: 82). Thus, the quest for knowing the God, reality or truth is also the outcome of the imperfect, insufficient and contingent nature of human conditions.

The major characters in *Journey to Ithaca* significantly seem to undertake a journey that is prompted by their spiritual quest. Therefore, not only the major characters but the setting and the imagery used in the novel become significant in the present context. *Journey to Ithaca* is a saga of multiple journeys undertaken by three different characters, at different planes of existence. In the novel Desai evokes spiritual India in all its endless complexity, and examines the nature of pilgrimage to India through the journeys of three foreigners. The journey undertaken by all the three major characters in the novel ultimately aims at the spiritual enlightenment. The Mother achieves it (302), Matteo imitates it (304) and Sophie follows it (305). At the end of their lives all the three major characters in the novel travel the path from the ashrama to the mountain peak of Himalaya. Their journey to India has meaning only in the context of spiritual quest. It is significant to note that Laila is interested in dancing that is combined with music. Anita Desai being an Indian knows the significance of dance and music as the medium through which one can achieve the enlightenment – which according to ancient Indian Philosophy is called Nadbrahma. Dancing and music create a rhythm that is used to establish communion with the sound of the universal spirit. It is represented by Omkar. Her experiences in the journey are essentially elemental – storm, rain, lightening, river and the mountain peak. The culmination of her spiritual journey takes place when she becomes one with the elemental forces. A special attention should be paid to the description of her experience on the mountain peak. Here Anita Desai writes: “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). The typical moment described here is the moment between ‘Day’ and ‘Night’ – life and death. At this typical and significant moment the wind blows about her and there is music in the wind as it plays upon the harps and lyres of the trees around her. It is this elemental music that is the real ‘Ithaca’ for the Mother. Again it is significant to note that the Mother is basically a dancer and the present moment of culmination of her spiritual experience is also full of elemental music. The blowing of the wind, the dancing of the wind, the dancing of the trees and the elemental music constitutes the oriental concept (ancient Indian) of Nadbrahma. The last part of the description is also very significant. The phrases ‘deep blue infinity’ and the ‘evening star’ have been the objects of Mother’s spiritual journey. The Mother’s life ends with the elemental music and she becomes one with the evening star of the “deep blue infinity”. Ultimately she comes to her ‘Ithaca’. ‘Ithaca’ has emerged through time as an archetypal image of homecoming, and has been widely used (from Tennyson’s *Ulysses*) by European writers as such. In the present novel, too, Ithaca emerges as an image of homecoming as the journey undertaken by the Mother and Matteo culminates in their returning to the spiritual home, that is their spiritual fulfilment. In the novel the Mother symbolically emerges as an image of ‘Guru’, as it is she who brings about Matteo’s redemption. Through the story of the Mother and Matteo’s redemption Desai has just symbolically represented the Oriental philosophy, for the dynamic and inspiring teachings of Upanishadic Vedanta, Bhagvat Gita and Buddhism are of the view that faith in or surrender to an incarnation or a prophet will bring about one’s redemption. At the early stage of his life in India, the absence of a proper ‘Guru’ leads Matteo astray. After running from one ashram to another in search of a ‘Guru’, Matteo reaches an ashram on the mountain in the North and at last

experiences Paramananda (bliss) at the feet of the Mother, the head of the ashram. Thus, his journey ends in total surrender to the Mother with the conviction that she is the “one who can reveal the unknown” (141) to him. Matteo is so obsessed with his pursuit that he simply does not care for or even remember his responsibility towards wife or children. This a very common attitude found among many Indian monks. In his pursuit of jnana (enlightenment), Matteo works for the Mother without desiring the fruit from that work. Thus, in Matteo one finds the three well-known ways of approach to Reality – Karma, Bhakti and Jnana. These ways of approach to reality are the essence of the Gita, which is characteristically a theistic Hindu scripture. Thus, Matteo symbolically re-enacts the spiritual adventure of ancients in his quest for truth. The symbol of ‘lotus’ is always found in the sacred Hindu, Buddhist and Christian literatures. The symbol of lotus suggests purity and perfection, for though it blooms in the mud, remains perfectly ‘defiled’. Like the ‘lotus’ the spiritually awakened being remains detached with the filthy materialistic world. That’s why the Mother advises Matteo “to be like a lotus flower, which is not wetted by water or stained by mud” (138). The belief in the possibility of man’s attainment of ‘highest bliss’ or ‘enlightenment’ through a humble return to nature is very common in Indian literature and Anita Desai, too, believes in this possibility. So she employs the symbol of ‘mountain’ in her novel. The mountain symbolizes moral and spiritual superiority. The Mother attains the absolute peace and the ‘miraculous spiritual power’ at the mountain peak. Like Matteo, it is her strong conviction that there must be a Master somewhere to show her the Eternal Truth. In this sense Laila, too, symbolically re-enacts the spiritual adventure of ancients in her quest for truth. In the final pages of the novel the symbols such as fire, rain, river and mountain are employed by Desai. On her journey to the Himalayas, with the desire to be free of this world, to escape into a better and brighter one, Laila visualizes an ‘Eternal light’ setting her on fire. The ‘fire’ signifies the pain and penance the mortal must undergo to achieve ‘deification’. The symbol of ‘fire’ has a purgative value. The ‘fire’ purges the mind of the aspirant of unwanted emotions that alone makes him or her worthy recipient of the intimations of immortality. At the mountain the evening star appears in the heavens and shines out from the deep blue of infinity. Seeing it Laila begins to dance in ecstasy and her dance in prayer and joy brings the Master to her pronouncing her “Shakti”, “Durga – Mother of us all”, “The Divine Force”, and “Sweet Goddess of the Mountain” (299). Thus, transformed, Laila could see the world itself, including all living and non-living things, radiant with beauty. She realizes the oneness of Man and God, of Mind and Nature. It is this transformation that makes her to smile at every old man, at dogs in the dust, and, “even the crows that morning seemed to sing and scream” (300). The image of crow is used by Desai to indicate the turmoil and restlessness within the minds of Laila and Sophie. The image of ‘crow’, in the novel, signifies the discordant cawing within man. Once the enlightenment is attained, the crows can be silenced or even they appear ‘radiant with beauty’. The enlightened Laila, at last, smiles at every old man, at dogs in the dust, and, “even the crows that morning seemed to sing and scream” (300). Thus the image of crow dominates the pages of *Journey to Ithaca* and contributes to the development of the theme of spiritual quest in the novel. Unless the storms of life are conquered, sorrows flooded away, and purity gained, the entry into the serene enlightenment cannot occur. Desai significantly suggests this by the use of symbols of ‘storm’ and ‘rain’. Laila enters the ‘Abode’ to become one with Prem-Krishna after conquering the tempests of life and

gaining the purity of mind. In Journey to Ithaca Desai presents a very profound Vedantic philosophy of the unfathomable knowledge of Nature. Matteo attains this 'miraculous spiritual power' after the death of his guru, the Mother. The Mother is but the 'spiritual leader' who guides her disciple towards truth and God. This is also symbolic. According to Hinduism the 'Guru' is the one, who shows the path of liberation (Moksha) to the disciple but Moksha is to be achieved by oneself by trial and error. Once the 'Guru' puts his disciple on the proper path, his work is over. This is what exactly happens in the case of Matteo and the Mother. After the death of the Mother it is the Nature that provides Matteo the spiritual enlightenment and he attains the Moksha here in this world. Thus, as Desai turns to the core of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and Vedanta and Upanishadas Journey to Ithaca encapsulates the wisdom of Oriental philosophy.

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