

Research Article

Secular Spirituality in Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*

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Abstract: This research paper seeks to examine secular spirituality, adherence to a spiritual philosophy without pursuing any religion, in Anita Desai's novel, *Journey to Ithaca* to mark the spiritual and secular effects in the life of the leading characters of the novel like Sophie, Matteo, and so on. Its chief objective is to note how Desai discards all social concerns and asserts and yearns for the universal yearning for meaning in life. To obtain this objective, the research tool used to conduct this research is the close reading of the text, *Journey to Ithaca* through the lens of secular spirituality theorized by Cornel w Du Tiot, Peter Van Dar Veer, and the like. The research finding is that the novel, *Journey to Ithaca* portrays the cultural similarities and dissimilarities as well as influences of India on the disillusioned hippies, and the children of affluence, with their reckless ways, and how they took to India and identified themselves with its spirituality and chaos. The novel, *Journey to Ithaca* makes abundant use of references and symbols representing spiritual and secular features which work together to depict the generous psyche of the characters.

Keywords: Devotion; Materialism; Mysticism; Secular spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

The research is intended to make an application of secular spirituality in Anita Desai's novel, *Journey to Ithaca* to mark how the novelist is conveying her thoughts, feelings, and message on the adherence to a spiritual philosophy without being fanatic about religion. Unlike materialism or material reality that refers to the thingness, spiritualism refers to the non-thingness, domain of self, infinite and eternal (Brady, 2019). All contradictions, conflicts, divisions dissolve into the love of awareness in spirituality. In India, spiritualism has been advocated by such thinkers as Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and others to articulate anti-colonial politics, the idea of service, love for others, the identity of Indian culture and civilization (Singh, 2019; Patra, 2013). Secularism connotes being detached from religion. Atheism, neutrality, and naturalism are associated with secularism (Hashemi, 2009). It is, therefore, noteworthy to investigate the issues of secular spirituality in Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*. Anita Desai, a screenwriter, and a short story writer, "emerged to be one of India's most respected novelists" (Menon, 2020, para. 1). Desai, considered to be an expatriate writer of Indian origin, was shortlisted three times for the Booker Prize and received the Sahitya Academy Award for her novel, *Fire on the Mountain* in 1978. Most of Desai's novels depict the state and the tensions of middle-class families (Patra, 2013; Menon, 2020). Kadyan (2016) sketches Desai as a prominent psychological exploring the troubled sensibility of modern men.

Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*, published in 1995, takes its title from a poem, 'Ithaka' by Constantine P. Cavafy (Kumar, 2015). The title also alludes to "Odysseus's return to Ithaca after the long war with Troy: it is the journey that matters, for it transforms one far more than reaching the actual destination does" (Kumar, 2015, para. 4). Bhandari (2022) elucidates Ithaka as "the city where all the journeys end, it is the ultimate goal. To reach there, one has to cover a long path, full of joys and sorrows; providing invaluable gems of knowledge" (para. 2). The novel records the pilgrimage of a young couple, Italian Matteo and German Sophie to India, and their spiritual life with an ashram organizer, 'The Mother', Laila. The couple leads an unhappy life because "Matteo is an ascetic, a mystic and Sophie is a practical woman" (Bhandari, 2022, para. 4). They are not attached to their two children who live with their grandparents in Italy. After failing to look after the father's business, Matteo arrives in India in quest of the eternal truth and meets the Mother.

Sophie also arrives there. Matteo “dedicates his whole life to understand the mysteries of life and, in the end, we see Matteo as an ascetic, weeping at the tomb of the Mother” (Bhandari, 2022, para. 4). The rationale of the paper lies in looking for the answers of such questions: What makes them leave his material life and reside in the ashram? Why does the guru, the Mother become a monster spider for Sophie? The novelty and originality of the paper lie in the researcher’s attempt to notice the secular spirituality in Anita Desai’s novel, *Journey to Ithaca*.

METHODOLOGY

For the justification of the proposed hypothesis, the study makes the close reading of the primary resource, that is, the text, *Journey to Ithaca* from the philosophy of secular spirituality. It applies a qualitative approach to research. Besides this, secondary sources such as the reviews on the text written on journals, websites, and other resources commentaries are studied to find the research gap. The systematic sampling method is used to collect and interpret data.

This research is developed through a theoretical framework based on secular spirituality. Secular spirituality is a spiritual philosophy that stresses inner peace and personal growth without following a religious institution (Elkins, et al., 1988). Toit (2006) theorizes the uniqueness of secular spirituality because it adapts to postmodern spiritual ideas, and it assists in building universal community through the common experiences of love and awe. Veer (2011) also believes that promotion of global community, maintenance of universal solidarity are significant aspects of secular spirituality. The philosophers of secular spirituality believe that universal truths can be perceived through a secular, non-religious view, without possessing supernatural power. Toit (2006) clarifies that spiritualism covers all human aspects beyond materialism. The key concerns of secular spirituality are such human as love, patience, forgiveness, compassion, integration, and spiritual freedom for others (Lama, 1999).

Thus, all these philosophies are useful tools applied in the analysis of the novel, *Journey to Ithaca* to explore how the universal yearning for meaning in life is carried out with following universal truth and generosity.

Review of Related Literature

Several critics and scholars have proffered both positive and negative views Anita Desai’s fiction, *Journey to Ithaca* after its publication. Reflecting on Desai’s concerns in *Journey to Ithaca*, Menon (2020) remarks, “one’s divided selves and the conflict between tradition (destiny) and renunciation or abandonment” (para. 3). Dassanayaka (2013) comments: “Masterfully written. I enjoyed the book, although while reading the middle part, I had doubts.

Initially, only Matteo and Sophie’s characters were coming up as real and well-formed. But Laila stays some mystic, unnatural, poorly based one till her diary comes up at the very end (para. 1). Das (2011) introduces *Journey to Ithaca* as Desai’s exquisite, exotic novel where a well-to-do European couple trip to India after they become fed up with their earthly life. Marking the blend of empathy and intelligence, Kumar (2015) review that Desai explores the West’s long fascination with Indian religion and spirituality through the story of a European couple who, like so many couples in the 70s, sought enlightenment in the subcontinent. Judging on the plot of *Journey to Ithaca*, Beach (2012) finds the novel “Thoroughly annoying. It began well enough but soon tailed off into gimmicky, improbable literary devices” (para. 1). But Menon (2020) is impressed by the writing style of Desai in the novel. It is “often poetic and descriptive, revolving around fiction and fantasy and the use of symbols and flashbacks” (para. 3). Anita Desai brilliantly narrates the story, skillfully sketches the characters, to reflect the mood and psyche of the characters and. Das (2011) reviews the narrative technique of Desai in *Journey to Ithaca* and states that Desai has used stream of consciousness technique, symbolism, flashback technique, figurative and poetic language to embody the exact psyche and tone of the characters.

In this way, the novel is observed from different angles by different critics and reviewers in terms of plot, theme, narrative techniques and characterization. However, the reviewers fail to address adequately the issues of secular spirituality that I have raised. Hence, the paper aims to fill the research gap and analyze the text from the perspective of secular spirituality.

Analysis and Discussion

The predominant concern of the paper is to notice the vision of secular spirituality applied by Desai in her novel, *Journey to Ithaca*. Desai explores the complexities human psyche with spiritual insight. Toit (2006) opines that spiritualism advocated anti-materialism. The novel has a spiritual beginning with a quotation of Milan Kundera from *Immortality*: “...things exist in their essence even before they are materially realized and named” (p. 1). The couple, Matteo (Italian) and Sophie (German), married in 1975, are not happy with their married life. But, they are not problematized by materialism; rather it is something deeper than that. While Matteo is a mystic person, Sophie is a down-to-earth woman. The secular spirituals attempt to gain the universal truths by being non-religious or secular (Veer, 2011). Matteo is detached from Sophie quest of the eternal truth. Matteo is not attached to the physical world, not even to his two children. They live with their grandparents in Italy. Matteo was a failure at school, in his studies and in games too. At home, Matteo’s tutor and the guide had given him a book, *The Journey to the East* by Herman

Hesse. This spiritual book offered Matteo the implication of the futility of life. It inspired Matteo to be in quest of divinity. The seekers of secular spirituality are not attached to material possession (Patra, 2013; Toit, 2006). Matteo's parents endeavored a lot to engage Matteo in their business, but it turned out to be futile. He had, perhaps, another mission in his life, and, therefore, he departed to India after feeling uncomfortable with his married life. He roams from one temple to the other, from one guru to the other, till in the presence of the Mother, he realized the supreme bliss. Matteo walks in the stairs of secular spirituality in his attempt to perceive the implications of life.

Veer (2011) suggests that secular spirituality develops when there are different beliefs, and the problem in the family integration. Sophie is a self-reliant journalist by profession, and believes in logical explanations of things. Though Sophie did not intend to visit India and delve there into the realm of the spiritual world, She had to trip to India to look for Matteo. Sophie did not notice any meaning in Matteo's obsession and madness in the pursuit of spirituality because she was not haunted by its vision. When they were mounting on a hill, Sophie met a strange woman carrying a sick baby. She dared not look at the face of the baby because she knew that it was dead. Sophie shocks us confessing her vision of India "At its heart is a dead child. A dead child, Matteo!" (p. 2). She found Matteo's inclination towards Indian Gods and myths his ignorance. When they visited the woman saint, who filled the room with perfumes, the first time, she protested saying "I have seen tricks like that at parties and magic shows" (p. 4). Sophie does not have trust on spirituality. She is a secularist at first.

Secularists have no faith in anything outside science and fact (Hashemi, 2009). After giving birth to two children, she left Matteo and moved to Italy, but there, she realized that she could not live without him. She was consumed by restlessness. She tried to be busy shopping and roaming about but "she knew she must fill the huge emptiness of Matteo's absence and this required some effort on her part" (p. 8). Sophie's secularist intent is obvious when Paolo, a young man, questioning the yogis in India, asks her to visit together and give Matteo a surprise. She retorts him spitting, "You? You are not fit to even enter his presence. He- he is a god" (p. 9). She was also being introvert. But when she heard the news of Matteo's feverish condition, she set out for India in "such a speed it seemed nothing mattered to her but to be with him" (p. 9). She loved Matteo intensely and passionately, but Matteo's coldness stabbed her lovelorn heart.

Secularists expect no discrimination from anyone (Hashemi, 2009). In India, Sophie becomes sick

watching Matteo's regard care for the frail Mother when they were in the Mother's ashram. She reacted violently. She could not understand his concern for the Mother and neglect of herself and their children. Sophie chased him against the wall, caught his head by his hair, and spoke, "Now find out what is mortal and what is immortal, what is sacred and what is profane. Now find out" (p. 11). Sophie disliked the Mother doubting that she was distancing the bond of Matteo and Sophie. She regarded the Mother as an evil creature. For her "the Mother was a monster spider who had spun this web to catch these silly flies" (p. 11). In India, Sophie nursed the sick Matteo complaining, "All you wanted was the Mother, you told me that. You said you needed the Mother, not me, not the children" (p. 12). She hated to talk about the Mother and wanted to discover the truth about her.

According to Solomon (2003), secular spirituality is marked when there is not any concern for worldly things. Sophie yearned for Matteo's physical presence, but Matteo had begun to reject it. Sophie disliked all the philosophical ideas of Matteo mockingly. She shouted,

'The Absolute, the soul, the Supreme Supra this and Supra that. Don't use those words, I am sick of them. They are non-words.'
Matteo retorted, 'And what words do you like? Don't tell me, I can guess. Food. Bed. Baby. House. Are those your words?' (p.14)

The seekers of secular spirituality nurture their thoughts discarding material things (Elkins, *et al.*, 1988). Matteo discards worldly things in his journey of attaining secular spirituality. Sophie mocked at Pierre Eduard, friend of Matteo who told Matteo and Sophie that they should not touch each other in the public. Sophie flushed and snapped angrily, "If not, how do all those come about" (p. 5). She was fed up with her life in India and forced Matteo to go back to their country, but Matteo had already stepped forward for him. When Matteo and Sophie were living in the ashram in India, Sophie could feel the malice in Matteo's behavior. This situation is described in this way: "He would grasp her and manhandle her as if to hurt her and, in fact, when she cried out in pain or fear, he would let out in a small laugh, exultant, as if he had achieved his end" (p. 6). Matteo was obsessed with the search for universal truth.

The followers of secular spiritualists experience awe but ignore personal relations for making a universal community (Veer, 2011). When the couple left the children in the custody of the grandparents, she could not bear the mischief of the children and would shout at them. Isabel's outburst of emotions while riding in a car towards home filled her heart with sympathy for her: "She dips her face down so Grandmother will not see. She tries to keep the sniffing to herself and yet the tears run" (p. 15).

Giacomo was sent to his uncle in the city for studies. While searching and collecting the facts about the Mother, Sophie realizes she herself has renounced her own children and never thought of them. Towards the end, she finds herself in a predicament and broods over her own life, leading her nowhere. She realized that she was neither a saint like the Mother nor mystic like Matteo. To Matteo, of course, this Mother figure seems like a manifestation of the Divine, while to Sophie she seems like just another transplanted granny. Some secular practitioners adapt to meditation for understanding spirituality (Jeffery, 2012). Matteo reaches for abstractions while Sophie attempt to bring him back to the realities of home, food and family. Their arguments end without any outcome because Matteo has a deep regard for the Mother:

Any time spent away from the Mother, without her, was wasted time, empty time, dead time, while Sophie is ill and in hospital, giving birth to their first child which, with her characteristic detachment, she sees as a rat or monkey. (p. 63)

Finally, feeling herself as confined as an animal, Sophie leaves the ashram only to find a zoo or prison. One experiences bliss in the pursuit of peace and integration (Lama, 1999).

Secular spirituality is a search for the meaning of life and a longing to understand the deeper dimension of life (Kathleen, 2011). In his spiritual trip, Matteo confronts many temptations and hindrances for the attainment of the eternal truth of secular spirituality. Matteo comes across many fake sages in India who were in the pursuit of the some mysterious salvation. Despite the hardships, Matteo does not give up in pursuing his goal. Spirituality is a matter of individual practice. Spirituality “relates to the process of developing beliefs around the meaning of life and connection with others, without any set spiritual values” (“What is spirituality”, n. d., para. 4). Matteo is not hesitated by the obstacles in his life because he is in the process of developing beliefs. Sophie begs Matteo to return to Italy to be with her and their two children, Matteo refuses. “You will leave, Sophie, but not I,” he tells her. They had already been in India for several years by this time. It’s the mid-80s, and Sophie now understands that their children no longer matter to him: “they were what we had left behind” (p. 34). Spirituality makes people forget personal issues for deeper inner experiences (Toit, 2006).

The secularists find the presence of God in nature rather than in any religion (Kathleen, 2011). Desai takes references from the Vedantic philosophy to display the significance of divinity in nature in *Journey to Ithaca*. Like the secularists, Desai marks the presence of God in every element of nature. People may attain enlightenment at different places. If the Mother acquires spiritual enlightenment at the hill, Matteo intends to depart from the hill for

attaining absolute peace. He attains enlightenment and miraculous spiritual power there. This is perceived in the communication between Matteo and Giacomo, his son. The narrator describes the event in this way:

To Giacomo, his father looks like the painting of Jesus in Church. This is nothing but Matteo’s salvation here in this world. 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. (p. 64)

Hinduism defines the guru as “a personal spiritual teacher or guide” (“guru”, 2021). The Guru is the one who shows the path of liberation 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” (p. 65). To create realistic effort Desai also uses Hindi words but in moderation. Beach (2012) critically remarks, “The only thing that irks us is her use of German songs and poetry in her novels without giving paraphrases, as though readers whether in India or abroad are supposed to know the German language” (para. 1).

In this way, 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. Matteo and Laila are the fragmented people but they keep on struggling to attain secular spirituality, human unity, and harmony.

Because nobody understood Laila, she lived a solitary life in a hill and enjoyed perceiving the language of the beasts living in the forest. One day, Laila was wandering in the markets when she noticed a bookshop of Madame Lacan. This incident opened her path to achieve knowledge about Oriental countries. There were plenty of books on religion, art, philosophy. She saw *Samhita*, *Rig Veda*, *La Kama Sutra*, *Rathavali*, *Upnishad*, *La Bhagwad Gita* and so on. Laila happened to read these lines of the *Attreya Brahmanan* of the *Rig Veda*:

There is no happiness for him who does not travel, Rohita! Thus, we have heard. Living in the society of man the best man becomes a sinner...Therefore, wander! The feet of the wanderer are like the flowers, His soul is growing & reaping thee fruit; And all his sins are destroyed by his fatigue in wandering. (p. 24)

Laila was inspired to understand the value of adventurous journey in life.

Laila became even more passionate in her mission. In a state of complete silence, Laila confesses: With it, my soul too set out in quest. At that moment, the evening star appeared in the heavens and shone out from the deep blue of infinity. Was that not a promise? An augury? I knew it was, and rising to my feet, I began to dance in ecstasy, the ecstasy of knowing my time had come. (p. 30)

In this way, Desai has incorporated her pursuit of secular spirituality in her characters. Laila and Matteo are the representative characters who search for the freedom of all beings and peaceful life. In the novel, India appears to be Ithaca or a holy space, capable of offering some positive messages in spite of all its ambiguities. Desai has chosen the icon to signify the instinct of secular spirituality that lies at the heart of human beings. The journey to Ithaca is the archetypal image of homecoming. In the present novel, too, Ithaca stands for an icon of journeying towards home both by the Mother and Matteo. The journey ends in their arrival at the secular spiritual home.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Anita Desai has presented the philosophy of secular spirituality in the novel, *Journey to Ithaca*. Neither the Mother nor Matteo adhere any strict religion. Secular spirituality is not a novel religion. Rather it is welcomes all the experiences spiritual quality. It is not limited to any transcendent realm. Secular spiritualists attempt to revive the meaning of their life by keeping themselves away from the impacts of industrialism. Anita Desai is successful in conveying that it is neither Indian religion, Gita, Vedanta and Upanishads nor the western doctrine that provides enlightenment and salvation to mankind. Rather it is by being one with nature and with the cosmic elements, by dissolving one's ego, a person, like Matteo or Laila, a person can attain enlightenment. Desai seems to convey that bliss can be achieved by those who discard the physical attainments of the world, and enter into the cosmic world of the natural elements. The Mother, Matteo and Sophie experience bliss. In *Journey to Ithaca*, we can experience the joy of living with the universal community. Desai is successful to hint that the path to the Godhood rests in the mission of universal harmony and love. Overall, the novel preaches the philosophy of secular spirituality which is living happily and helping others.

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