

# JOURNEY TO ITHACA : A DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE TO MATERIAL WEST

*Journey to Ithaca* (1995), Anita Desai's tenth novel, consists of six parts including one Prologue and one Epilogue. The narrative shuttles back and forth in the past and the present time and the text is constructed through the conflictual relations of different discourses out of which emerge the power relations of different characters. While constructing the power relations between two western characters who are husband and wife, the novelist is seen to take a western feminist position; but when the power relations between the western woman and the oriental woman are concerned, she shifts to the Third-world feminist position which coincides with her postcoloniality in which she is prompted to collude with the discourse of Hindu religion in respect of the empowerment of the oriental woman.

Now let us see how the novel has so far been reviewed and commented upon. In the *New York Times*, Paul West has considered it as 'a daring colourful novel almost impossible to absorb in one reading'. (<http://www.amazon.com> 29-05-01). In the *New Republic*, Pearl K. Bell finds it as 'an illumination and a blessing' (Ibid). In *San Francisco Chronicle*, Mandira Sen has deemed it as 'a rich tapestry of the contemporary human condition in an alien environment ...' (Ibid). In *Washington Post Book World* Judith Weinraub observes that in the novel 'the intensity of India is seamlessly conjured up' (Ibid). Again, Mrinalini Solanki has studied it as 'a quest for integrated being' (M. Solanki in V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar (ed.) 1997 : 90). All these reviews and comments are seen not to coincide with my feminist reading of the novel.

However, a similarity is found between Forster's *A Passage to India* and this novel. As in Forster's *A Passage to India* Mrs Moore and Adela Quested came with an intense desire to know India in the pre-independence India, so in this novel Matteo, an Italian, and his wife Sophie, a German Journalist, come with a desire to experience India in the post-independence period. For Mrs. Moore and Adela India appeared as both muddle and

mystery. But this couple begins to understand India from two different ideological positions. Matteo has a will-to-spiritual-knowledge-for-power which he developed through his relation with his English tutor, Fabian who created an urge for an odyssey to spiritual India through his teaching of Hesse's *The Journey to East* to him in his childhood :

If thou would be with that which thou dost seek! Follow where all is fled. (20)

Observing his behavioural change in India, his wife reminds him of the effect of Hesse's book on his subjectivity :

If it were not for that book, you would not have thought of coming to India or following this guru of yours to your death (87).

Agreeing to his wife's observation, Matteo confirms that 'it was the book that opened my eyes' (Ibid). Sophie also, like Matteo, read oriental literatures, but her scientific rationality remained and remains unaffected by the discourses of Orientalism. So, it may be argued that while Matteo tries to see and understand spiritual and mystical India with the heart and mind of an orient, Sophie analyses India from a western Enlightenment position and constitutes her knowledge about it in the colonial style.

By the logic of colonial discourse Sophie considers India as a land of romance and adventure, so she wants her husband to travel with her all over India so that she can fulfil her desires :

I want to go to Goa and eat shrimp, I want to go to Kashmir and live on a houseboat. And lie in the sun and shampoo my hair and eat omelettes all day (47).

But Matteo refuses to follow her on the ground that his life has a design from which the signs come to guide him. In addition, he tries to disarm her by applying his knowledge derived from *Katha Upanishad*. On the basis of this knowledge, he endeavours to make her understand that there are two paths : the path of joy and the path of pleasure : the former is the path of the wisemen and the latter, that of the fools. He cannot relegate himself to the

position of the fools in following his wife. Not only this, he reminds his wife that his coming to India is not to make romance but to understand the Indian 'mystery that is at the heart of India' (57). In his view, in Europe it is not possible to understand mystery because there 'people do not even know there is a mystery. No one thinks about it' (58). But in India :

There are people – great sages – to guide you. I need such a person (Ibid).

Thus Matteo wants to dominate his wife.

However, Sophie accompanies her husband while the latter moves from ashram to ashram, but she does not allow her western rationality to be affected by Indian mysticism and spirituality. Rather she tries to discover the negative sides of them. She discovers casteism and racial feeling in the ashram. She finds that God has no power to bring about a miracle while a child is dying over his mother's shoulder in the temple of gyanadeva. She also discovers that swamis are concerned about so many litigations and court-cases relating to the property of the ashram. She also finds out that ashram life is not free from the practice of illegal sex. The pregnancy of an unmarried woman and the ill-treatment towards her bear testimony to the fact. In most cases she thus differs with her husband; even she is not afraid to differ with other persons such as Pierre Edward and Mr Pandey on these issues. Pandey and Pierre find an elderly lady spread perfume over a crowd of men and women just by waving her hands over them. This incident appears to them to be miraculous, but Sophie contradicts them by considering it as a magical trick.

That Sophie hates to be the devotee of the ashram is revealed in her behaviour. While Matteo tries to observe each and every code and ethic of the ashram life, Sophie is reluctant to observe them. She does not participate in the morning prayer, construes 'Satsang' – which is in Indian sense a company of the truthful – as a congregation for 'body odour' (47). Moreover, she maintains her western identity with the predilection for western food like beefsteak, martini, chocolates, strawberries etc.

As Sophie begins to feel bored with her husband in the ashram, she leaves him to join in another pilgrimage through India which becomes suffused with rich and aromatic haze of marijuana :

It clung to her and became her clothing. It penetrated her and became her being (58).

However, in this pilgrimage she gets the scope for an exchange of views with some other western women about India. She still goes on constructing India in the negative terms. In opposition to Matteo's mystical India, she constructs India as a country of various diseases like typhoid, hepatitis, cholera, eczema, leprosy. She also comes to know from Shulu, Phyllis and Andrea that the lives of the western women are not safe in India. These incidents justify their conclusion. Firstly, a white woman meditated in a cave in the Himalayas in order to achieve psychic power. But as she was returning to her hotel, on the way she narrowly escaped an explosion in her taxi and the next day she was found dead on her bed in the hotel. On outopsy it was found that one portion of her heart was entirely missing. Secondly, Phyllis and Andrea were raped by the boatmen in Goa. From this Sophie concludes that in a violent male-dominated society a woman should not move alone. So she again comes back to Matteo in the ashram.

Matteo, on the other hand, has subjected himself to the norms of the ashram life. He has almost given up the western style of living and put on a faded and torn kurta, pyjama and chappals. He has already met a yogi who had not slept for twenty five years, an ill-fed, undressed saint and a yogi who could summon cloud out of the sky. But Matteo has realised his limitation in regard to the attainment of spiritual transcendence. The question has arisen in him why he cannot see and experience what the others do. For this he has been admonished by one of his Indian companions to see India with the eye of faith. After the admonishment, he has begun to meditate and concentrate alone in a rented room. But success has not come in his way. As a result, he is gripped with frustration. Frustration haunts him, even when he copulates with his wife who understands :

The love-making he did with a new contempt and a violence that was so unlike him (80).

However, his obsession with his search for spiritual transcendence affects his health in such a way that he falls ill. Sophie, instead of leaving him, tries to recuperate him by breaking his obsession through her reminder to him of Siddhartha's warning to Govinda in Hesse's *Siddhartha* :

Perhaps you seek too much ... as a result of your seeking you cannot find (88).

But Matteo's will-to-spiritual power is so deep-rooted that Siddhartha's advice to Govinda fails to dispel his obsession. Rather he begins to think that his life had so long 'been empty of meaning, but now is not' (Ibid). Because of this faith in spirituality, his quest for transcendental self is carried on. Interestingly, a sea-change takes place in his mind as he finds a book entitled *The Mother* in the railway bookstall. He becomes more restless after being fascinated by the photograph of the Mother on the cover-page of the book. Without taking care of his pregnant wife in the Mission Hospital, he proceeds by rickshaw in search of the Mother's ashram.

Mother's power and authority make an indelible impression upon his mind. From her he learns : 'work is worship', 'Divine force is everywhere' (99). However, the discourse of Mother's attainment of spiritual enlightenment through her relation to her Master leads him to think that he can achieve spiritual transcendence by relating himself to Mother. With this realisation Matteo begins to feel alive in presence of the Mother :

Everything else came alive (108).

But Matteo's blind-faith comes into conflict with Sophie's rationality. She construes Matteo's escape into Mother's ashram as a pretext to renounce his worldly duties as a husband and father. So she asks him :

Would you work like this for your father if he asked you to join his business? No, you wouldn't, you would refuse outright. So why do you do it for her? What do you get out of it? (125).

These questionings cut Matteo to the quick, yet with maddening patience he retorts :

That is the point. Father would make work so I could become self-supporting, or so that I could take over the business over him ... But the Mother doesn't make me work for anything. She teaches us to work without desiring the fruit from the work. Isn't that a higher way of life (Ibid).

But Sophie's indomitable power of reasoning cannot spare her husband until she succeeds in bringing him to her fold, so she counters :

If work doesn't bear fruit, it does not serve its purpose (Ibid).

Even when her power of reasoning fails to discipline her husband, she tries to exercise her power over him by labeling the Mother as 'hypnotist', 'magician', 'monster', 'spider who had spun this web to catch these silly flies', and the 'junk of the society'. (127). But as the application of the labeling technique towards the degradation of the Mother's spiritual position cannot bring any result, Sophie, by the right of his wife, asks helplessly:

Why is the ordinary not enough for you? Home, family, a child? Why must you run after the extra-ordinary? (141)

Even when this desperate appeal to her husband makes no effect upon him, she violently accuses him of being in love with her. In spite of this accusation, Matteo makes no sign to cut off his relation with the Mother. Rather he tries to make his wife understand what he gets from his relation with the Mother :

Listen in her presence I feel I am more alive ... Her presence heightens and illuminates the experience of living as no one else's does. Why? Because she contains – she is the container of a power that gives the world this heightened and illuminated quality. When I leave her, I feel I am falling (Ibid).

Here it may be argued that by enabling Matteo to construct a confessional discourse like this, Anita Desai seems to deconstruct the western colonial and patriarchal discourses that

empower the western man to dominate woman both in the inner and outer domains of culture. But here in the confessional discourse the western man is willingly surrendering to the spiritual power and authority of the Mother.

But the materialist Sophie is not yet ready to give up the battle. She knows that a man by nature does not like to be dominated by a woman. On this assumption, she finally hits at his masculinity by reminding him :

It is not the stone or shrine that keeps him here. But it is a woman who keeps you here. Call her what you like – the cosmic, the Absolute – but she's a woman (147).

What is implied here is that in the colonial technique by representing the Mother in her absence as an ordinary woman she wants to exercise power over the Mother as well as her husband. But the Mother's spiritual grip over her husband is so firm that she cannot make it loose, so she becomes psychologically tired and leaves for her parental home in Europe without giving a least recognition to the Mother's power.

But in her parental home, Sophie comes into clash with her mother whose over-possessive nature creates problems for her children, takes them over completely. She finds it difficult enough to have her choose what the children are to eat, what clothes they would wear etc. But when it comes to demanding that they be baptised, and baptised in the same church as that of Sophie, then she cannot but rebel :

No, I did not leave India and all its superstitions and rituals to come here and submit to the tribal rites of Europe (152).

The implication of this utterance is that Sophie's attack is as much on Indian superstitious rituals as on European tribal rites. Here it may be noted that in colonial discourses Indian cultures are always represented inferior to the western one. But in this context one can argue that in questioning the seemingly self-evident superiority of the western culture through Sophie, the novelist seems to subvert the colonial discourse that claims the occidental superiority over the oriental other. As Sophie argues :

You talk of Indians as if they were barbarians because they cremate the dead and toss them in the river. But what about you? You believe a baby should be dumped in a basin water by a priest and have some mumbo-jumbo said over its head or it won't go to heaven, eh? (Ibid).

Not only that, she also refuses to observe the christian religious norms in respect of the baptism of her children :

No one need think that by coming back to Europe I have come back to the church. I haven't. Oh, hypocrisy! (Ibid).

Here it would not be an exaggeration to note Christopher Norris's interpretation of Kantian 'Enlightenment'. He construes the Enlightenment both as a process in which men participate collectively, and as an act of courage to be accomplished personally (Christopher Norris in Gary Gutting, (ed.) 1994 : 169). In the second sense, Sophie shows her sense of Enlightenment by arguing against the christian hypocrisy and the Indian superstitions and thereby brings out the ethics of her life which are premised on the values of autonomy, freedom and self-determination.

Again, Sophie has to return to India to attend to her sick husband in the hospital where she can easily guess that it is the book of the Mother that has made a deleterious effect upon her husband. So long her battle against the Mother has been at the pathological and psychological levels, but now it comes down to the discursive level. She now engages in a discursive battle for ideological dominance over that of the Mother in order to rescue her husband from the grip of the Mother's ideology. She assures her husband :

Whatever there is to find. The book only gives you the legend. I want to go behind that, find out what she really is, how she came here, why. I want to know her. Then I can show you, too, who she really is. (159).

With this assurance she starts her odyssey for producing an alternative knowledge about the Mother on the basis of the collected data about her. The production of knowledge about one's life in terms of one's absence, as in her book *Imperial Eyes : Travel Writing and*

*Transculturation* (1992) Mary Louise Pratt observes, is a colonising mode of producing knowledge. On this view, Sophie's discursive strategy is akin to the colonising mode, although her project is not at all concerned with the colonial civilizing mission, rather its aim is to disentangle her husband from the halo of the Mother by constructing an alternative truth about the Mother. The politics of her project is to exclude the spiritual part of the Mother and construct her as an ordinary Third-world woman dancer.

But Sophie's mission gets stalled with the discovery of the Mother's personal diary sent to her dance master by the Mother herself. With the discovery of the personal diary from the dance master's box, Sophie's position is relegated from the producer of knowledge to the recipient of knowledge about the Mother. The Mother's diary contains the spiritual part of the Mother. From this one may guess that the novelist, perhaps by the discursive pressure of nationalist discourse, disallows the western woman to intervene in the spirituality of the Mother.

However, the Mother's personal diary is in the nature of a confessional discourse in which the Mother has confessed that she was urgently in need of a vision of the supreme. But her dance master Krishna whom she gradually exposed as false master misled her into disharmony, a commodified world of art. As a result, there was a failure on her part to attain a spiritual harmony and that failure made her ill. But again in the missionary hospital, as she has confessed, there was an attempt on the part of a member of Christian community to mislead her. Mary, with the hope of providing her with solace and peace, presented her a 'crucifix' which she discarded as 'an image of sin and suffering' (291). She was accused of being wicked for her act of throwing Christ's cross on the floor, but she felt no repentance. Rather she brought in a counter-charge against them who made an attempt at misleading her from the path of truth and beauty. What is worthwhile to note is that the novelist seems to debunk the messianic force of Christianity through Laila's, Mother's real name, acts of throwing the cross and of representing it as an image of sin and suffering.

After that incident in the hospital, as she has confessed, she made a pilgrimage to the Himalayas and at its peak she felt an ecstatic feeling while dancing a dance of the milkmaid pining for the shepherd. In her dance she heard her Master interpellate her :

Thou art shakti,  
Supreme power,  
Thou art Durga,  
Mother of us all  
Thou art Kali  
The Divine force  
And Parvati  
Sweet Goddess of the Mountain (299).

Through those interpellations, she became Kali, Durga, Parvati and thereby a female power. We see here two things. Firstly, the novelist, by the logic of the modern discourse of liberalism, has endowed a muslim Egyptian woman with the power of autonomy in choosing her way of life, and then lastly she has empowered her as Kali, Durga, Parvati who are the incarnations of female power, in collusion with the discourse on traditional Hindu religion.

However, the battle between the western woman, Sophie, and the Mother's book has not yet come to an end. Sophie has come back to the Mother's ashram after knowing all about the Mother from different sources and she has even read the Mother's personal diary. But in the ashram she is informed that the Mother has passed away and that Matteo has left the ashram without leaving any message for anybody, even for his wife who came back from Europe. This makes her mission futile. Sophie now is not in a position to say to her husband that there is 'nothing much' (305) in Mother's life. This suggests that the western woman cannot any longer find scope for holding sway over her husband's subjectivity which has already been moulded by the Mother's discourse of spirituality. Besides this, Sophie thought that her husband would at least wait for her until she returns. But she finds that he has left without any message for her. This perhaps makes her realise that in patriarchal capitalist society the wives are required to wait upon and wait for their husbands, while the latter would show no concern for their wives. However powerful the woman may be, she is powerless in relation to her husband. This leads her to understand :

Why the Mother went on that pilgrimage, why anyone goes on a pilgrimage and she must go too (305).

What is implied here is that one of the many possible means of resisting male dominance or male indifference is to sidestep heterosexual marriage which the Mother had done by going on pilgrimage and thereby achieving a female power by virtue of which she has caused a metamorphosis in Matteo who is shown, through the eyes of his son, as a person who 'looked like the painting of Jesus in the church' (309). This no doubt refers to her spiritual power. Thus valorizing the Mother's spiritual power over the western woman's power of rationality, the novelist takes the Third-world feminist position which overlaps with her postcoloniality which underscores the superiority of Indian spirituality over the material West.