

RELIGION IN ANITA DESAI'S JOURNEY TO ITHACA

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Abstract

Hence *Journey to Ithaca* is not so much a book that celebrates cultural differences as much as cultural similarities, certain aspects of religions, such as the refining nature of suffering and self-abnegation are seen to be common to all religions. Hence Desai might be commenting that the alleged superiority of one culture over another is based on differences that are only skin deep. Eastern and western religions share much more in common than is commonly assumed, hence the real error is to elevate any one religion over another and proclaim its superiority as these religions share much in common and have the common denominator of the universality of the search for meaning and human suffering.

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Ostensibly a satire on mysticism that does not prove to be authentic religion due to the dubious background of the mysterious Mother and a critical look at her methods of mind control and manipulation, *Journey to Ithaca* is actually rather more ambivalent on the superiority of Western religion and proves to be generally sceptical about the redeeming nature of religion in general, as Sophie's decadent life of comfort and luxury in Italy seems to be an object of criticism as well.

Ultimately, Desai seems sceptical about the capability of both eastern and western religions to provide divine revelation and sustenance as what comes to be embodied by fallen human beings fails to perfectly represent the divine.

On the surface Desai seems to be critical of how eastern mysticism has proven to be a fraudulent religion that has taken over Matteo's mind and led him to abandon his family, wife and children in pursuit of a meaningless idol in the form of Mother who seeks his worship rather than his welfare.

Yet her novel does not seem to favour Western alternatives as well as it terms Christianity a religion of suffering and lowliness and describes baptism as superstition. Desai also seems to be critical of the decadent life of luxury Sophie leads when she is back in Europe and Italy in contrast to the self-abnegating life of simplicity and ascetism that Matteo leads in India in his pursuit of divine truth.

Hence it would become apparent that Desai favours no religion over another and sees flaws in any systematic or organized religion which has the potential to grow into a cult, as Desai observes with Mother's mind-control of Matteo, in instructing him to seek to worship her purely and forget about his family commitments to Sophie and his two children. Yet Mother whom Matteo unreservedly idolizes proves to be all too human as she is mortal and stricken with cancer eventually and dies.

Mother also proves to be have a shady and dubious past as it is revealed that she was previously no religious leader but a dancer from Egypt, who having grown bored with Islam, travels to India in search of divine love and truth and finds it in the worship of the hindu god Krishna after dancing with a Krishna like lead dancer in the band of gypsies she had followed from France. It seems that Mother has abandoned one god for another and in the process turned herself into an idol by seeking devotees and seeking that they abandon their families to dedicate themselves fully to the worship of her.

Indeed, in the last paragraphs of the book Matteo's son Giacomo describes Matteo as resembling Jesus, and indeed maybe it is not so much which god one seeks to serve as much as the purifying search of truth and ascetism that has led Matteo to resemble Jesus and the divine even though he has gotten himself caught up in the worship of a false idol in the form of Mother.

Hence while Desai criticizes the exploitative and manipulative nature of religious leaders in the form of Mother who turns herself into an idol and exploits her followers to earn their devotion, worship and service Desai does not deny that the pursuit of truth can be a purifying process as Matteo's life of ascetism and self denial has led him to resemble Jesus at the end of it. Indeed Desai might be commenting on the exchangeability of religions in this respect because while Matteo had been worshipping hindu gods, it is Jesus he comes to resemble because of the life of self-abnegation, purity and ascetism he leads.

Desai seems to be commenting that it is not so much the end or god one worships that makes a difference but the process or searching for the truth, leading a life of purity, holiness, self-abnegation and ascetism that leads one closer to resembling the divine than the false idols one clearly worships that comes in the form of Mother in this book, who claims that she worships no God but clearly would have her devotees worship her as a God and gets them to cultivate a life of dependance on her. She sinisterly suggests to Matteo that a life apart from her would be a life of darkness, as she brings him to see a yogi who lives in a cave apart from what she calls her divine light.

Indeed Mother's claims to embodying divine light are highly questionable. She claims to have expelled suffering and darkness from the group but it is clear that in his pursuit of truth in the form of Mother Matteo has suffered. He suffers from all kinds of illnesses and develops a cruelty towards Sophie and his family, leading him to rape Sophie violently in disgust at her and abandon her with the children subsequently in pursuit of what proves to be a hollow truth as the Mother whom he worships so unreservedly dies of cancer at the end and is no immortal source of divine light but has brought all her followers to hardship and disease with her at the end.

Indeed it would become apparent that Matteo's ruthless pursuit of truth has blinded him to the needs of his family and those around him. The inhumanity with which he treats Sophie and the children is disturbing to say the least, especially when it becomes apparent that the idol he is sacrificing his family for is not worth the sacrifice. Mother is highly flawed, seeking absolute control over her followers and devotees and demanding that they sacrifice their families to come to worship her, while what she embodies is no divine light but a hunger for power and absolute control over her devotees.

Hence this seems to be Desai's commentary on organized religion in general. It starts out with the motive of redeeming its follower, but along the way its leaders in their hunger for power turn themselves into idols and Gods in place of the actual transcendent Gods and thus become personality cults where what followers worship is not the transcendent God but the fallen, power-craving and abusive religious leaders who turn these religious movements into cults.

Desai thus seems to be connecting on the divine gap, that the transcendent cannot be adequately embodied by the material but becomes corrupted by it in the process. Indeed, Mother set out as a devout follower of Krishna, there is little doubt about that. But in the process of building up her ashram and leading her life as a guru she has turned herself into an idol, and a false idol at that because she is deeply human and merely craves power, leading her to punish Matteo for desiring to be with his family and leading him to abandon his family in pursuit of the truth, which proves to be a lie because Mother turns out not to be a God but a mere mortal when she eventually becomes stricken with cancer and dies.

Yet even as Desai seems to be critical of false idols and cults in the form of the shady figure of Mother, Desai seems to respect Matteo's search for truth even though it has led him to inhumanely abandon Sophie and the children. The description of Matteo at the end as a figure who resembles Jesus points out the fact that his suffering has refined and purified him and made him a more exalted figure than Sophie who has lived decadently in comfort and luxury back in Europe and knows very little of suffering.

Matteo's search of truth has led him down a hollow path in pursuit of a false idol indeed in the form of Mother, but the suffering he has endured in the process has purified and refined him so he becomes a figure who is more exalted and holy than Sophie.

Indeed Sophie recognized this when she dismisses Paolo, a hippie who has been pursuing her and tells him bluntly that he cannot compare himself with Matteo because Matteo is a god. Matteo's relentless pursuit of truth has refined him and purified to the stage that even Sophie recognizes his divine resemblance to a god at the end of it.

It is the suffering that he has experienced that has ennobled him, and Matteo's search for truth proves to be not entirely in vain as he strikes out a more exalted and divine figure than the complacent and pampered Europeans at the end of the novel.

Desai has thus written a complex meditation on the nature of religion. Firstly she has commented on the corruptibility of organized religion and the possibility of these religions devolving into cults when they revolve solely around power hungry personalities, in the specific form of Mother in this novel. Yet Desai does not seem to deny the purifying journey that religion puts one through, with suffering in general being the ennobling factor.

Ironically while Mother had sought to eliminate suffering from the group it is clear that her devotees have suffered from Mother's mind games and it is clear that they are stricken with a high level of discomfort, illness and self-abnegation in pursuit of her. Ironically Mother had denied any affiliation with Christianity because she wanted no suffering but the suffering she has caused her devotees has brought some of them including Matteo to resemble Christ.

Hence while Desai seems to denounce cult figures and false idols like Mother who set up religions merely to escape life and exploit her followers, Desai does not seem critical of the process of Matteo's search for truth and ascetism which has led him through so much suffering that he resembles Christ at the end of it. It is the search for truth, the journey and the process of searching for truth that produces divine like qualities in Matteo, not the false idol he worships in Mother.

So while Desai seems to denounce organized religion in general she does not seem to be critical of those who lead lives of self-abnegation in pursuit of truth like Matteo.

Desai thus seems to be commenting that regardless of the God one worships, in Matteo's case it had been a Hindu god rather than a Christian one, it is the process of the searching for divine truth and the self-denial and suffering that takes place in pursuit of it that makes one worthy of the divine rather than the fallen leaders who lead organized religions.

Desai thus seems to be making an unusual claim that gods are exchangeable, because while Matteo had been pursuing a hindu religion he comes closer to resembling Christ because the universal experience of suffering as a refining fire is what brings him closer to the divine than the complacent and overfed Europeans back home.

Desai thus celebrates the religious journey rather than the religious end, in the end Desai seems to be commenting that it does not matter so much which god one worships as the purifying pilgrimage that takes place that refines one.

While critical of the false idols that have developed personality cults around themselves in the form of Mother, Desai is not critical of the religious process of pilgrimage and ascetism that leads one to purity as Matteo's life exemplifies.

Hence the novel is aptly titled journey to Ithaca, which is understood to be a holy place. It is the journey of religious purification and self-abnegation that Desai celebrates rather than any version of one God over another.

Thus one reviewer has aptly commented that Desai has brilliantly described the meeting of eastern and western culture and indeed if I were to understand Desai correctly, there are more similarities than differences as the pursuit of a hindu god has led Matteo to resemble Christ, there are certain religious experiences which are universal irregardless of which God one worships, as long as there is a process of ascetism, self-abnegation and suffering it leads to a process of religious purity.

Indeed Matteo could hardly have experienced this process of purification back in Europe with all its wealth and complacency. Sophie aptly remarks that Matteo is a god in comparison with Paolo because he has chosen suffering over comfort and denied himself so much that it has purified him and brought him closer to divinity than the spoilt and overfed Paolo.

Ironically while Matteo had pursued a hindu god in the version of Krishna, it is Christ that Matteo ultimately resembles and this might be a comment on the exchangeability of eastern and western religions.

Both religions see their Lords as a saviour and a lord of light, and indeed Desai might be commenting that eastern and western religions share more in common than is commonly supposed. Hence *Journey to Ithaca* is not so much a book that celebrates cultural differences as much as cultural similarities, certain aspects of religions, such as the refining nature of suffering and self-abnegation are seen to be common to all religions. Hence Desai might be commenting that the alleged superiority of one culture over another is based on differences that are only skin deep. Eastern and western religions share much more in common than is commonly assumed, hence the real error is to elevate any one religion over another and proclaim its superiority as these religions share much in common and have the common denominator of the universality of the search for meaning and human suffering.

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