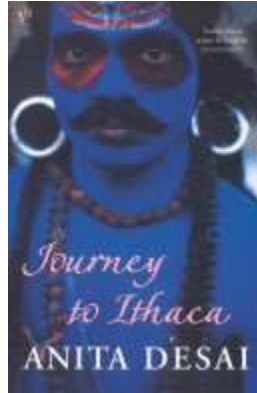


Quest for Travel in Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca and The Zigzag Way*

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Abstract

Anita Desai, one of the famous Indian woman writers, has frequently used ‘travel’ as a major motif for the physical and mental movement of the characters in the novels *Journey to Ithaca* and *The Zigzag Way*. This paper **Quest for Travel in Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca* and *The Zigzag Way*** is an attempt to study how Desai has brought out Self-fulfillment through travel in the novel *Journey to Ithaca* and how travel is efficiently used for the renewal of the past of one’s ancestry in the novel *The Zigzag Way*.

Introduction

Meeting people from other spheres of life introduces ideas and occupations that people never knew existed. Travel conjures up different images and emotions to each and every one based upon age, experience and, their current circumstance irrespective of their desires. Travel gives you the opportunity to break away from the mould that people have shaped around them. Thus travel sometimes lead people to a new path and ultimately help them to frame a new life for them. No matter what type of travel one embarks the thrill of the journey is always an adventure.

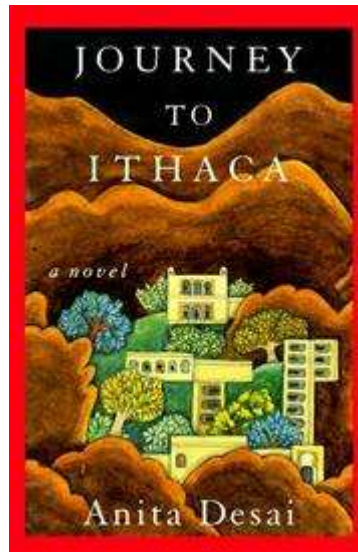
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The famous Roman philosopher Seneca has rightly said that “Travel and change of place impart new vigor to the mind” (*qtd. in Das 56*).

Self-Fulfillment through Travel in *Journey to Ithaca*



The very title *Journey to Ithaca* symbolizes the search for the fundamental truth of life, the reality embedded in the complex fabric of existence. *Journey to Ithaca* is a journey where Ithaca ceases to be a specific place, namely, Ulysses’s long-lost and yet long-cherished homeland. Further, Rai rightly defines ‘Ithaca’ as “... back home or celestial city” (*qtd. in Chakraverty 98*).

Self-Discovery through Travel

The process of self-discovery through travel, though does not yield the promised ecstasies, does result in much pain and more knowledge. The point is that the journey is more important than the destination. Like this, in the name of attaining self-fulfillment, characters carry out various travels in Anita Desai’s novel *Journey to Ithaca*. The important idea of travel leading to transformation is depicted in this novel.

In the novel, *Journey to Ithaca*, the conflict between sacred and profane love is a theme that connects the dilemmas of both Matteo and Laila and draws Sophie too within its realm because she is an affected party. The dichotomy between sacred love and profane love remains ever present in Matteo’s quest for truth and enlightenment and remains unresolved, but it is

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fruitfully resolved in the quest of Laila who achieves transformation into the calm and serene Mother at the culmination of her journeys.

Journey to Ithaca

Journey to Ithaca begins with two quotations – a poem ***Ithaca*** by C. P. Cavafy and a line by Milan Kundera – both of which are indicative of its thematic trust, while the title encapsulates the gist of the novel. Milan Kundera’s line “... things exist in their essence even before they are materially realized and named” (*JI XIII*) is true with Matteo and the Mother, as the novel dramatized the dilemma of these two characters who strive to find a higher meaning in a strange world. It was the urge to search that made a man of an ordinary biologically human entity; the search created the soul.

Alienation – View on India through Outsider’s Eyes

In a way ***Journey to Ithaca*** is a view on India through outsider’s eyes. Desai’s central pre-occupation as a novelist is with the existentialist outlook on human life. Deeply infected by the existential problems of modern industrial age, Desai has created unique characters that are largely eccentric and abnormal in their mental make-up and hence totally unable to perform.

Alienation, loneliness, unawareness of vital issues of life and lack of concern for one another are the elements of the Modern age. The Modern age has been justly termed ‘The Age of Alienation’. These aspects of Existential philosophy are closely knit and woven in the fabric of Anita Desai’s novel ***Journey to Ithaca*** and transform them into delightful, fascinating and profound studies. An intense awareness of man’s rootlessness and an acute sense of alienation springing from it forms a distinctive part of Desai’s vision of the predicament of Modern age. ***Journey to Ithaca*** is an interesting study of immigrants caught in the crisis of identity and suffering from terrible alienation and intense mental torture.

Sophie - the Victim of Alienation

In ***Journey to Ithaca***, Sophie is the victim of Alienation in a country like India which is totally different from her native land, Germany. Sophie is a beggar of Matteo’s love. But Matteo wants to leave his familial life in the pursuit of his Self-fulfillment and finally Matteo is

somehow satisfied with his search for truth and identity. Sophie is tightly trapped in the hands of alienation and loneliness in an unfamiliar land. Desai with her unique style has brought out the sufferings and experiences of Sophie in India. Sophie was exhausted through continuous travels. She feels India as a horrible cage to live in. She wants to escape from India through some way or the other. She said to Matteo “I can’t – I can’t here, in this zoo. I want to go away. I want us to be ourselves” (*Jl 53*).

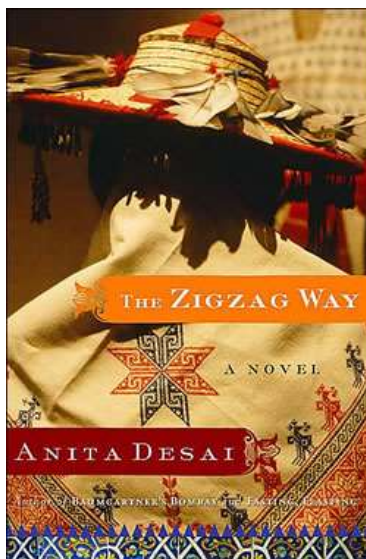
Willingness to Accept Pain

On the other hand, the Mother and Matteo are willing to accept pain to attain their self-fulfillment in an unknown country like India. Thus through travel, Desai has beautifully depicted the different viewpoints of sacred love and profane love. But Matteo and the Mother reject their familial life for the sake of attaining the meaning of their lives. So, Matteo and the Mother has got quest for travel to attain their self-fulfillment. Through Sophie has got several grudges towards India, she constantly undergoes travel to attain the unbounded love of her husband, Matteo.

Travel to Know Thyself

Man can’t reach his Ithaca unless his inner self is awakened. At the end Sophie’s inner self was awakened and so she decided to follow the path of her husband who was her self-fulfillment. The essence of Indian spirituality that the Mother upholds and Sophie and Matteo realize at the end, stresses on the journey within – Know Thyself. Desai has skillfully intertwined quest for travel and self-fulfillment in the novel *Journey to Ithaca*. In this way, Desai’s novel *Journey to Ithaca* is simultaneously a travel book and also a description of spiritual journey to one’s inner essence i.e. self-fulfillment.

Renewal of the Past through Travel in *The Zigzag Way*



Anita Desai's novel *The Zigzag Way* published in 2004 aims at probing into the areas of experiences of colonization, migration and a nostalgic way of identifying the past. The literary scenario of the novel is made up of an unusual blend of hybrid and diasporic cultures and it is considered a unique and important area to investigate identity amidst decolonization and globalization.

Mexican Past

In *The Zigzag Way*, Anita Desai traverses across familiar Indian milieu. This novel is set in Mexico, the city presently with over twenty-million people; a large Latin American Republic ruled by Spain from 1521 to 1822. Most Mexicans are descended from Indians and Spaniards. Colonization allowed the people of the countries like Mexico to travel abroad either to visit or to settle there for several reasons. The sensuous relics of Mexican past became the motif of the novel and, as a spontaneous response, Desai spiced her own imagination through the mode of travel with the historical background.

Eric's Journey

The pages of the novel *The Zigzag Way* weld a young American would be writer Eric's journey with the history of silver mining, genealogy of characters, formation of Mexican culture through the centuries of migrations, personal histories, rituals, cultural practices, beliefs, realism and fantasy linking Mexico with Cornwall, New England and Vienna in kaleidoscopic images.

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Eric seeks to know more about his grandfather, who he knows made an improbable journey from Cornwall, England to the silver mines of Mexico. It is the means by which Desai approaches Mexico, not to understand it, but to lay out its conflicting parts: the politics of identity, the irony of its warring selves, its stark physical beauty, its mingling of secular and spiritual beliefs and its history of colonization.

A Metaphor

The title of the novel *The Zigzag Way* is a metaphor for the winding path followed by Indian miners to enter the pits from outside is a labyrinth that Eric treads to discover his past. Eric's journey takes him to Dona Vera, a Grande dame surrounded by acolytes and snappy pug dogs, inhabiting the Hacienda de la Soledad. This contact releases in his mind half-remembered stories, told in his childhood in Cornwall, England. Tales of mining available in the library of Dona Vera in exotic places of hardships make him have elegiac visions of the loss and deprivation of his ancestors in the midst of the turbulence of revolution. The archives and travelogues and also the uncanny revelations connect Eric with his dead grandfather Davey. Images of zigzag ways, labyrinths, tunnels and dungeons abound in Eric's illusions, travels and experiences.

Renewal of Ancestry

The slim novel *The Zigzag Way* with a turbulent mood opens with ancient Chinese metaphor about time: "The ancient Chinese believed time is not a ladder one ascends into the future but a ladder one descends into the past" (ZW 2). As Desai has a longing for the remote past, Eric peels back the layers of the past. To examine how either Eric or the writer with irresistible sense of nostalgia peeped into past, it is needed to have a glance at how the narration moved. Rootlessness is another theme in the book that circles around the characters that are uprooted from their native lands. The mode of travel has made the novel easily peel the layers of the past.

Open Ending

The novel has an open ending, leaving Eric abruptly at the graveyard of his grandmother, Betty. The keen subtle eye and tranquil elegant prose carrying the surrealist stories of several

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lives lead the narrative through synecdoche into the dark corridors and cunning passages of the past unveiling before us multivalent colourful cultural histories. The conflation of accounts of mining, rebellion, wars, ethnic rituals, ceremonies, ghosts, history of ruins and devastation with the lurking images of the individual moments, of loneliness, of wandering men and women has spiced the novel with rich flavor.

History and Quest for Travel

The novel is infused with history and the quest for travel, which luminously captured the enchanting landscape of Mexico. Desai's acute sense of history is redolent of sensuous landscapes of Mexico, Maine, Vienna and so on. The haunt of the souls will continue to follow the reader even after the close of the novel. Desai speaks of travel quite often. She has told, "There are two types of travelling: there is the stumbling, directionless kind and there is the more efficient sort, where you know exactly where you are going and how long it will take" (*qtd in Lakshmi 136*). In Eric's travel he felt as though he had been starving throughout his "... northern existence and now reborn a traveler" (*ZW 28*), could feast and gourmandize. When a man is rooted in a new land, he will be often haunted by the past and dilemma arises between the native culture and the alien culture. This fact has also been strongly signified in the novel.

A Meditation

The Zigzag Way is not just a condensed course in twentieth century Mexican history but a meditation on the vision of Desai's efforts to outrun the past. At the end of the novel Eric has been acquainted with the philosophy of life that the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam visualizes: "... fill the cups that clears TO-DAY of past regrets and future fears" (*qtd. in Das 145*). A strong sense of distant time and place haunts almost all the characters. In the novel *The Zigzag Way*, Mexico with its history of silver mines and its presence of beautiful sunsets on purple mountains is a vivacious presence to be felt almost at every step. The title of the novel, *The Zigzag Way* also reflects Desai's approach to her story. The book swings between eras. Thus Desai has presented a vibrating novel for her readers who at the end of the novel will get a strong fervor to renew the past of their ancestors.

Conclusion

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In the novels *Journey to Ithaca* and *The Zigzag Way*, Anita Desai has revealed a wide range of travel and how it has been escorted to self-fulfillment and renewal of the past in the lives of the characters. Thus she has deliberately brought out the proposal that travel gives a new sense to one's life

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