

Seeking the Self in the Other: Psychoanalysis, Orientalism, and Spiritual Quest in *Journey to Ithaca*

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Abstract—Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) offers a profound exploration of psychological alienation, spiritual longing, and the fragmented consciousness of modern individuals. This paper examines the novel through a psychoanalytic framework, arguing that the spiritual quests undertaken by the protagonists, Matteo and Laila, function as symbolic responses to deep-seated psychological conflicts rather than purely religious pursuits. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, and Edmund Fuller, the study interprets the characters' journeys as manifestations of repression, sublimation, and the search for psychic integration.

Matteo's restless spiritual search is analysed as a neurotic response rooted in paternal absence and emotional deprivation. His rejection of material abundance and obsessive pursuit of a spiritual master are understood as forms of sublimation and displacement, reflecting unresolved childhood trauma and a compulsive desire for authority and meaning. Laila's trajectory, in contrast, reveals a different psychological pattern. Her rebellion against domestic expectations, emotional volatility, and eventual transformation into the revered spiritual figure known as "the Mother" are interpreted through the lens of hysteria, archetypal symbolism, and identity reconstruction. Drawing upon Jungian archetypal theory, the paper suggests that Laila's spiritual persona represents both a compensatory psychological mechanism and a strategic act of self-invention designed to overcome feelings of invisibility and emotional neglect.

The study further situates these personal quests within the broader discourse of modern alienation and postcolonial spiritual tourism. Through Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, the novel is interpreted as a critique of the Western tendency to idealize the East as a repository of mystical wisdom capable of healing the existential emptiness of modern life. India, in the narrative, emerges not merely as a geographical setting but as a symbolic psychic landscape onto which the

protagonists project their unconscious desires and emotional voids.

By integrating psychoanalytic theory with literary analysis, the paper demonstrates that *Journey to Ithaca* ultimately portrays the search for spiritual truth as an inward psychological struggle rather than an external pilgrimage. The novel's enduring significance lies in its portrayal of alienated individuals who seek meaning beyond material civilization yet remain trapped within unresolved inner conflicts. Through its nuanced depiction of psychological fragmentation and spiritual yearning, the text reflects the broader modern condition of existential dislocation and the elusive human quest for wholeness.

Index Terms—Anita Desai, *Journey to Ithaca*, psychoanalytic criticism, alienation, Freudian analysis, trauma, spiritual quest, repression, escapism, existentialism

Anita Desai stands as one of the foremost Indian English writers to deeply explore the inner life of her characters. Across her oeuvre, she has consistently foregrounded the complexities of psychological realism, portraying her protagonists as individuals burdened not merely by external circumstances but by a profound interiority marked by loss, disintegration, and existential yearning. In *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), Desai moves beyond the realm of the familial and the urban—domains she often explores—and takes her characters on a transcontinental spiritual pilgrimage. However, the journey is not so much a geographical expedition as it is an inward odyssey, reflective of emotional turmoil, unconscious desires, and fractured identities.

The novel, set against the spiritual backdrop of India, invites a psychoanalytic reading wherein the spiritual quest is understood as a substitute for the characters' unconscious conflicts and repressed traumas. Both

Matteo and Laila, the central characters, reveal symptoms that align with classical psychoanalytic categories—neurosis, sublimation, hysteria, and the search for the idealized parent figure. Their spiritual discontent becomes a metaphor for emotional alienation in a world marked by loss of meaning and identity.

This study argues that *Journey to Ithaca* exemplifies the modern condition of alienation through a Freudian and post-Freudian framework. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, and Edmund Fuller, this paper situates Desai's characters within the broader paradigms of psychoanalytic and existential thought. It reveals that the novel's central tension lies not in the external quest for truth, but in the internal struggle for integration of the self—between the conscious and unconscious, the personal and archetypal, the real and the imagined.

Psychoanalytic literary criticism posits that human behavior and motivation are largely governed by unconscious desires, repressed memories, and unresolved childhood conflicts (Barry, 2017). Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious, particularly the dynamics between the id, ego, and superego, and mechanisms such as repression, displacement, and sublimation, offers a foundational lens through which to understand character behavior in literature.

Carl Jung, Freud's one-time protégé, expanded psychoanalytic theory into the collective and symbolic realms, introducing concepts such as archetypes and individuation—the process of integrating disparate aspects of the self (Jung, 1964). Meanwhile, Erich Fromm (1955) viewed alienation as a loss of connection to both inner and outer worlds, arguing that modern man suffers not only from political and social crises but from profound emotional and spiritual disorientation.

Alienation, then, in psychoanalytic and existential terms, is both an intrapsychic and cultural condition. It arises when individuals experience a split between who they are and who they are expected to be, between their inner desires and the demands of the external world. In Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*, alienation is both a personal pathology and a thematic constant, affecting not just Matteo and Laila but extending to the broader postcolonial and spiritual landscapes they traverse.

Desai has often articulated the challenge of writing about "the complete human personality" in a world

marked by spiritual decay and identity loss (Desai, 1995). In her fictional world, characters are often rootless, emotionally fragile, and disconnected from coherent selfhood. Her protagonists do not simply suffer the ordinary afflictions of daily life—they endure psychic dislocation.

In *Journey to Ithaca*, this sense of estrangement is magnified. Matteo and Laila, though born into Western privilege, are tormented by a sense of purposelessness. Their flight to India symbolizes an unconscious yearning for restoration and inner cohesion. As Edmund Fuller (1958) suggests, modern man is afflicted not only by external threats but by "a conviction of isolation, randomness, and meaninglessness in his way of existence" (p. 14). Paul Brunton (1941), whose writings Desai appears to have drawn upon, called the 20th century "a time of uncertainty, perplexity, and unsettlement." Matteo and Laila's journeys unfold within this uncertain terrain, where traditional religious and familial structures have failed to provide meaning, and where spiritual seeking becomes both a hope and a compulsion.

Matteo's psychological profile is constructed around loss and deprivation. Though surrounded by luxury in his Italian upbringing, he finds no solace in material abundance. The family home, with its "velvet hangings and tapestries" (JI, p. 14), is not a sanctuary but a prison, a symbol of the emotional sterility he yearns to escape. His father, a distant figure preoccupied with business, embodies a world of hollow materialism. The emotional void is palpable; Matteo feels "an absence, a lack, where his father should have been" (JI, p. 22). This paternal absence becomes the central wound of his psyche. Matteo's rejection of food—surviving only on bread and water—is a form of sublimated anorexia, a desperate attempt to assert control in an emotionally starved environment and to protest against the meaningless consumption his family represents. He seeks purity, a purging of the very world his father signifies.

His emotional emptiness finds its first anchor in Fabian, the tutor who introduces him to the spiritual literature of Hermann Hesse. Fabian becomes more than a mentor; he is a symbolic father figure, filling the void left by Matteo's biological father. This need for paternal guidance aligns with Freud's Oedipal theory, wherein unresolved desires for the parent of the opposite sex and identification with the parent of the same sex shape the individual's superego and

subsequent desires (Freud, 1965). Matteo's search is fundamentally for a master, a guide, a father who can provide the meaning his own could not. He confesses his yearning was for "a Master who would have the key, the answer to the questions that were consuming him" (JI, p. 45).

Matteo's spiritual journey becomes a classic instance of sublimation—redirecting his emotional suffering into a higher, culturally sanctioned goal. As Freud (1965) explains, sublimation is a key defense mechanism by which the psyche manages its instinctual energies. Matteo's search for truth, therefore, is not a rational endeavor but a compulsive quest driven by unconscious pain. His constant fleeing—from home, school, and ultimately the West—suggests an unresolved flight response associated with early trauma. He is perpetually in motion, not towards a goal, but away from a void. His travels through India are marked by a frantic, almost desperate quality, moving from one ashram to another, one guru to the next, finding fault in each. This restlessness betrays his neurosis: the external search is a displacement of an internal problem that cannot be solved geographically.

Laila, later known as the Mother, mirrors Matteo in her emotional dislocation but manifests it differently. Her hatred for bourgeois domesticity—represented by her mother's world of "silverware, photographs, china dishes and statuettes" (JI, p. 158)—is visceral. She rails against her parents' expectations, accusing them of entrapment within a "small, stuffy, suffocating world" (JI, p. 160). Her tantrums, self-harm, and erratic emotional outbursts are classic signs of hysteria, a diagnosis historically linked to repressed female desire and the social control of women (Showalter, 1997). Her actions are a desperate scream for an identity beyond that of a daughter or wife in a patriarchal society. She feels invisible, her inner self completely unrecognized.

Laila's pursuit of dance in Paris functions as both an aesthetic and psychic outlet. Dance allows her to reconnect with her bodily instincts and offers a form of symbolic transcendence. It is the one domain where she feels agency and power. "When I danced, I felt I could fly, I could leave the earth," she says, "I was no longer Laila, the daughter of my parents, but a creature of air and fire" (JI, p. 164). The movement of the body becomes a powerful escape from the rigidities of

familial and societal expectations, a language for the emotions she cannot otherwise articulate.

Her eventual transformation into the Mother—a revered spiritual figure—is both an act of radical self-invention and a profound psychological compensation. After a journey through Egypt and finally to India, she sheds the identity of Laila, a name she felt never belonged to her, and assumes a new persona. Through this persona, she achieves symbolic elevation, embodying what Jung (1964) called the Great Mother archetype—a universal image of nurturing, power, and transcendence. She becomes the all-giving, serene figure she herself perhaps yearned for. However, this identity is also a defense mechanism—a grandiose mask to conceal deeper wounds of emotional neglect and a fractured self. By becoming 'The Mother,' she erases the painful history of Laila, the hysterical girl. This reinvention is a desperate act of psychic survival, a way to impose order on a chaotic inner world.

While both characters are motivated by internal fractures, their psychic trajectories diverge, highlighting different responses to alienation. Matteo remains in a state of unresolved longing, a perpetual seeker. Even in India, surrounded by ashrams and gurus, he finds no peace. His existential question—"What is truth? Where is it?" (JI, p. 176)—echoes the spiritual confusion of the modern self, endlessly seeking but never finding. He finds the gurus to be flawed, fraudulent, or simply human, which shatters his idealized projections. His neurosis ensures that no external authority can ever satisfy the internal lack. Desai resists the temptation to resolve Matteo's story with catharsis. He is left in a state of suspension—neither enlightened nor fully broken. This reflects Freud's concept of neurosis: a condition where repressed desires return in disguised, often debilitating forms (Freud, 1965).

In contrast, Laila appears to find a temporary, albeit constructed, equilibrium. Her role as the Mother grants her reverence, purpose, and symbolic meaning. Yet this stability remains suspect, particularly as it is scrutinized through the eyes of Matteo's wife, Sophie. Sophie's investigation into mother's past peels back the layers of the myth, revealing the vulnerable, troubled Laila beneath the serene Mother. As a figure who must constantly perform spirituality for her disciples, Laila is perhaps more isolated than ever. Her mythic persona may represent not true transformation but an entrenchment in a carefully constructed illusion.

She tells her followers, “I am here for you,” yet her own needs remain hidden, repressed under the weight of her archetypal role. Her ‘Ithaca’ is a fortress she has built around herself, but it may also be a prison.

Matteo and Laila’s projection of their inner needs onto the cultural canvas of India aligns with Edward Said’s critique of *Orientalism* (1978). Their spiritual tourism reflects a broader postcolonial commentary on the West’s tendency to idealize the East as a repository of mystical wisdom, a cure for its own spiritual sickness. India, in Desai’s narrative, becomes less a real place than a symbolic landscape—a screen upon which Matteo and Laila cast their unconscious fears and hopes. Matteo seeks a “primitive purity” he believes the West has lost, while Laila finds in India’s spiritual traditions the raw materials to construct a new, exotic identity far removed from her Egyptian-French origins.

This dynamic also resonates with Fromm’s (1955) notion of alienated desire—the displacement of personal voids onto abstract or external objects. The characters’ idealization of India is less about its actual cultural richness and more about its capacity to absorb and reflect their psychic yearnings. Their journey is not one of genuine cultural engagement but of appropriation for the sake of psychic healing. They are not seeking India; they are seeking a cure for themselves within a fantasy of India.

Journey to Ithaca is ultimately not about spiritual success but about the painful and complex process of emotional reckoning. Matteo and Laila’s journeys reveal the inadequacy of external solutions to internal crises. Desai’s novel becomes a psychological cartography of alienation—a narrative of fragmented identities seeking coherence in a world devoid of easy answers. Through the psychoanalytic lens, Desai complicates spiritual journeys by interrogating the unconscious motives behind them, revealing that such quests often stem from unresolved trauma, repression, and a compulsive yearning to heal inner voids. Matteo’s unresolved longing and Laila’s performative transformation reflect the modern individual’s desperate struggle for meaning in an age of psychic and social disintegration.

This psychoanalytical insight finds striking resonance in contemporary real-world phenomena, particularly in the widely reported spiritual transformation of *Hoshi Takayuki*, a Japanese entrepreneur who renounced his prosperous lifestyle to become a

Shaivite ascetic in India. When examined through the same psychoanalytic framework applied to Matteo and Laila, Takayuki’s journey reveals similar patterns of sublimation, displacement, and identity reconstruction. His rejection of urban affluence and embrace of asceticism mirror Matteo’s symbolic renunciation of his father’s materialist world, while his new identity as a spiritual teacher, Hoshi Takayuki now renamed as Bala Kumbha Gurumuni, can be viewed as a psychic strategy—much like Laila’s transformation into the Mother—for achieving inner cohesion through the adoption of an elevated, archetypal role.

This pattern is not an isolated case but part of a broader cultural narrative of the 20th and 21st centuries, where figures from privileged Western backgrounds seek psychic restoration in the East. A quintessential example is *Richard Alpert*, the Harvard psychology professor who, facing a professional and personal identity crisis, journeyed to India and was reborn as the spiritual teacher *Ram Dass*. His transformation, catalyzed by his guru Neem Karoli Baba, is a direct parallel to the novel’s themes: the intellectual’s search for a ‘Master’ to resolve existential angst, the shedding of a former identity laden with psychic conflict, and the construction of a new persona rooted in the ‘Wise Man’ archetype. Like Laila, Alpert’s reinvention as Ram Dass was an act of profound psychological re-ordering, a way to heal the fractures of his former self. Similarly, the famed pilgrimage of *The Beatles to Rishikesh* in 1968 can be seen as a collective enactment of Matteo’s quest. At the zenith of their material success and global fame, they experienced a profound sense of alienation and meaninglessness, seeking solace and “truth” from a spiritual father-figure, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Their eventual disillusionment and departure echo Matteo’s own restless journey from one guru to another, highlighting the neurotic pattern where no external authority can ultimately fill the internal void.

In a more contemporary and commercialized form, *Elizabeth Gilbert’s memoir Eat, Pray, Love* documents a similar psychic trajectory. Propelled by the trauma of divorce and depression, her journey across Italy, India, and Indonesia is a quest for self-healing. India, in particular, functions as a therapeutic landscape where she attempts to find spiritual discipline to quiet her inner turmoil. This mirrors the characters’ use of India as a screen upon which to project their needs for

psychic healing, aligning with the critiques of both Orientalism and what Fromm called "alienated desire." Even the life of technology icon *Steve Jobs* fits this paradigm. His early journey to India in search of enlightenment was driven by a deep sense of being an outsider and the unresolved trauma of his adoption—a powerful echo of Matteo's "paternal absence." Though he did not adopt the life of an ascetic, he sublimated the quest's core principles of simplicity and intuitive insight into his work at Apple, effectively creating a new secular religion of design and innovation. The external quest for a guru was transformed into an internal drive that reshaped modern culture.

In bridging the literary and the real, Desai's narrative emerges as prophetically attuned to the conditions of contemporary spiritual seeking. Whether fictional or lived, these quests—of Matteo, Laila, Takayuki, Ram Dass, or even The Beatles—reflect the universal struggle to find meaning amidst psychic dislocation. They are separated by genre and geography, yet united by a deeper, archetypal yearning: to reach Ithaca—not a destination on a map, but a metaphor for psychological unity and inner peace. However, as Desai suggests through the novel's open-endedness, such Ithacas may remain elusive, their promise deferred in the ceaseless movement between desire and renunciation, self and other, the unconscious and the real.

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