

**THE TRANSFORMATION OF 'LAILA' TO 'THE MOTHER' IN ANITA  
DESAI'S JOURNEY TO ITHACA****VIVEK DINKAR KHABDE**S. S. Dhamdhare Arts  
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Pune.**ABSTRACT**

Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* published in 1995 charts the journey of the couple from Germany to India who were in search of the ultimate truth. The spiritual quest in the novel reveals many facets of human personality and varied human aspirations. The novelist takes the reader on the journey in the realm of spirituality of age old Indian spiritual and mythological tradition. The novel does not remain a mere quest for the search of spirituality but goes beyond and searches basic human longings and aspirations. The novel charts the physical as well as psychological journey of the Sophie and Matteo and Laila. The paper discusses the transformation of the character Laila which later becomes The Mother.

**Keywords** – Journey, Transformation, Spiritual Quest, Physiological Journey, Physical Journey, Quest Motif, Characterization.

The title of the novel is inspired by C. P. Cavfy's poem 'Ithaca', where the poem gives significance to the journey rather than the ultimate destination. The journey itself gives varied experiences and the riches of the journey have much more to give to an individual. Journey matures the soul. Every individual undertake journey in the form of very day experiences which comes to him in his life span as life itself is considered as a journey. Though difficult, we undertake and complete the journey of life as it gives us enlightenment and every day comes with a unique experience. *Journey to Ithaca* has European characters who undertake journey to India. Life seems to be for Desai as a continuous search for the things which gives meaning to life. Matteo gets attracted to India by reading the book on Indian spirituality and mythology. The book 'Journey to the East' attracts Matteo towards India and is accompanied by his wife Sophie. The physical journey for both of them was a difficult task. The author has also highlighted the inner experiences of Sophie, Matteo and Laila. There was a trend of undertaking spiritual quest towards the oriental countries among the Westerners. Sophie accompanies Matteo but has practical outlook towards life, as opposite to her husband Matteo. Matteo has devoted himself to the search for the ultimate truth and fails to look beyond it. Sophie feels dejected and cheated in India and tries to persuade Matteo to return to Germany. Matteo has strong inclination towards the Indian spiritual tradition and rejects the idea of returning.

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Matteo is Italian by birth whereas Sophie is from Germany. After getting married, the couple soon decides to undertake journey to India. The book *The Journey to the East* inspired Matteo to go to the East. After reaching, the couple roams in India in the search of true guidance about learning the spiritual aspects of Indian tradition. They move from different places meeting different Gurus, ashrams, swamis but could not find a genuine place for them where they can get what they desired. Both Matteo and Sophie have different Outlook towards their life. Matteo has spiritual Outlook towards life whereas Sophie has practical Outlook. The couple's search ends when they meet Laila alias the Mother.

Laila is from France born to Hamed and Alma who is a French teacher. Laila's character is the most peculiar character in the novel. The mother is the spiritual Guru who lives in an ashram who too like Matteo has a spiritual Outlook towards life. The Character of Laila is mystical who has dedicated her life in the search of ultimate truth. Laila, born in Egypt, had of Frank way towards life. She too was like Matteo was not much serious about life. Her mother Alma was worried about her daughter. Laila was carefree in her childhood. Who stayed out for many hours away from home and would return home late in the night. Both of her parents were teachers. But Laila was not much interested in studies. From childhood itself Laila was a strong headed girl, and was independent. Most of the times Laila's answers to her parents were confusing to them. Laila was mostly interested in dancing and had very little interest in studies. She felt like that she is living in a prison at her parents' home. Dancing gave her a sense of freedom. Freedom was everything for her she was independent and freedom loving girl from her childhood itself.

Laila's parents took the decision of sending their daughter to Cairo as they thought that after sending their daughter to Cairo will arouse her interest in studies. Laila too had interest in going to different places in the world and hence accepts their proposal of going to Cairo. Laila considered life itself as a journey. Just like Laila developed interest about visiting the eastern country like India by reading the book *The Journey to the East*, Laila too, met hagdah in a café. And the lady in the café aroused Laila's interest about the city which stood in the water and the place where God and goddesses reside. Laila's inclination grew with time and she decide to undertake journey in search of God and experience it. The life in Paris also was like an imprisonment for her. Nobody could understand Laila's inner desires and she felt solitary. The visit to the bookshop of Madame Lacan changes the course of her life. She read many books regarding the Oriental philosophy there was a vast collection of books on philosophy religion travel, art, Rig Veda, La Bhagwad Gita etc. The lines from Rig Veda inspired her,

*'..... The fortune of him who is sitting, sits;*

*It rises when he rises,*

*It sleeps when he sleeps;*

*It moves when he moves.*

*Therefore, wander!'"24*

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The reading of Oriental philosophy has made a deep impact on her life and adventure and journey became mission of her life. Laila kept visiting the book store and one day she happens to see a poster of Krishna-Lila. The name Krishna Lila has aroused her interest as she found resemblance in the name Lila and her own name Laila. Laila asked more details about the poster, the dancers and the show. Laila attended the show which she liked the most. Spellbound by the performance, Laila joined the troupe. Dance became a medium of communication for her to the almighty. But later she was made to visit different countries for the shows. She visited different places like America, Italy and other countries. Earning money was not her aim. She got ill due to over exertion. Krishna ji, the actor in the troupe, persuaded her and she decided to stay back. Later Krishna ji brought her back to India and sent her to visit the temple as he thought it would be a solace for her. She was made to visit the Lakshmi temple as she was told Lakshmi was the goddess of wealth and prosperity. But Laila was not interested in wealth and prosperity. She was famous by now due to her performances worldwide. Laila even denied to worship Krishna ji who tells her to worship him but she mocks at the idea of worshipping an actor who pretends to be Lord Krishna.

Laila meets Mary, a nurse in the hospital who presents her with crucifix but Laila here too rejects it as she only wants to get the truth, the ultimate, eternal truth. Later Laila decides to go on a pilgrimage with one of the members of the troupe named Vijaya who was going to Himalayas with her family. The quest for Laila continued though the journey was hazardous – the rail journey, the continuous travel has affected her health. But she continued on her journey in the search of the ultimate truth. She sees a banyan tree as a 'Tree of Eternity'. She experienced the 'light' through the tree of eternity and she could not face it as she covered her face. Now Laila could sense that she was near to her destination. She finds her master, a true Guru. Now finding the right place, Laila decides to continue her spiritual journey in the ashram. Later after the death of her master, Laila becomes the master- 'The Mother' in the ashram. She goes to the ashram, but later she could wait no longer and decides to move on in the night to meet the master who will lead her to the eternal truth. She continued climbing whole night and reached the top of the mountain where she felt that she met what she was searching for. She danced in ecstasy. She later becomes a spiritual guru called as the Mother who showed path to people who came to her ashram. Her transformation is highlighted by Desai and is seen as multifaceted personality of women as a voyager, a guru and the mother. 'The Mother' is courageous, truth seeking and shows path of divinity to the people. Desai has taken a non-Indian character as a spiritual guru in the form of the Mother which shows path to the European person like Matteo. Desai has taken a woman character at the center of the narrative of the novel like Laila, The Mother who becomes a spiritual guru who excels in the search for the ultimate truth of divinity. The author also succeeds in showing the other side in the character of Sophie who is practical in her outlook. So, the image of a woman is not confined to a mere home-maker but has different personality traits as being a practical woman, a woman who seeks eternal truth and undertakes difficult journey with courage.

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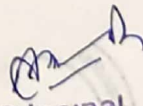
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