

**DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN MEERA SYAL'S ANITA AND ME****POORNIMA M. D.**

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ABSTRACT

This paper depicts the diasporic experiences of Indian migrants in the novel Anita and Me which was written by Meera Syal. Syal is a British English writer who was born to Punjabi parents in Wolverhampton. She uses her personal experiences as an Indian descendant in the novel. She has written two novels Anita and Me and Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee. The novel Anita and Me is said to be a semi-autobiographical novel. Syal has brought out the diasporic aspects such as culture shock, alienation, assimilation, common history and myth, formation of ethnic group, longing for home ambience and longing to visit the imagined ancestral home, maintaining religious beliefs and so on. Acculturation and assimilation play a vital role while depicting the diasporic experiences and the novel also depicts the difference between experience of the first and the second generation migrants. Encounter of Eastern and Western ways of life produces hybrid characteristics among the Indian migrants. It is brought out through the attires of Indian characters; their food habits also enfold them in their ethnic community. This paper also represents restrictions that these migrants face in the host land.

Keywords: *Diasporic experiences, assimilation, adoption, cultural differences*

Introduction:

C.Vijayasree remarks that when women writers write about diaspora, they discover several challenged 'spaces within the diaspora, address multiple forms of oppression and render definitive versions of diaspora impossible.'(61). Meera Syal can be considered as one such woman writer of diaspora. An Indian descendant and a prolific writer, Meera Syal, was born in 1963 near Wolverhampton in the West Midlands to Punjabi parents. This novel depicts the experience of the protagonist Meena Kumar, a ten year old girl, through whom the author tries to decipher the perplexity of existence of an Indian Punjabi family in the white society. As she is born and brought up in the foreign land by the Indian family, she is blended with



both the ways of life of the host land and the conventions of the homeland. The two ways of life problematize her survival in the foreign society. The author carefully delineates the character of Meena who does not deviate from the thoughts of her age. Throughout the novel she remains a young girl characterized with the same innocence that any girl of her age possesses.

Meena's family lives in the midst of the white community. They are the lone Indian Punjabi family in the mining village Tollington. When the novel opens, the narrator and protagonist Meena describes the village. Sandy, a divorcee, who lives on the same street where Meena's family is settled, is found to be accepting them as a whole. After Meena's mother Daljit helps Sandy by lending butter or giving her lift down when she misses her bus, Sandy admits, "You're so lovely. You know, I never think you as, you know, foreign. You're just like one of us." (AM 29). The comment gives the hint that the Indian family is gradually assimilating into the host society. It also reveals one more aspect that when the host society is benefited by the migrants, there is a chance of getting mingled with them. Divya Girishkumar figures out: "Her [Syal] works problematize the notion of 'Englishness', positioning diasporic identities as dynamic and fluid." (26). Syal's characters belong to the new generation who are able to view the English world through the English eye even though they are of Indian origin.

Meena's assimilation into the host society becomes easy as she is brought up in there, that is, the mining village Tollington. But the assimilation of Indian elders of Meena or the first generation migrants is not like that of Meena or of the second generation. The way of observing the host land and its culture differs from generation to generation. While Meena likes to prepare pastry with Mrs. Worrall, her mother insists on her learning to cook *sabzi* or roll out a chapatti.

Meena craves for her identity as a pure British. So, she selects Anita Rutter as her guide and mentor in the host land. She finds Anita to be a disruptive girl in her village. She admires Anita for being so and feels proud to be in her gang. She expects Anita to spend more time with her than she does with the other girls. She adores and is compassionate towards Anita's little sister Tracy for her innocence and affection she has for Anita. But, Meena's intuition alerts her when Anita indulges in vicious practices and, at last, she decides to give up her friendship with Anita. It proves that in spite of her yearning to be a complete British girl, she could not go beyond the ambit of her mother culture. The alarm that rings in her mind is because of her parents' inculcating a sense of ethnicity in her.

Adami points out the skin tone discrimination in Syal's writing. He says, "The discursive representation of the ethnic body, which is a leitmotif in Meera Syal's writing too, defines the colour of the skin as the indelible mark that characterizes, protects and wraps the self" (131). This is a true statement for it is obvious that not only Africans but also Indians who are put under the category 'Black'. It is evident in her novel *Anita and Me* where the character Sam



argues in the English festival against Indians and terms them as blacks which hurt the protagonist Meena, who is a second generation migrant in the fictional place of Tollington. The 'hurt' does not deter Meena from facing therapist Sam boldly.

The author Syal has cleverly used the first person narration throughout novel which has helped in revealing the exact feelings of a ten-year old second generation girl Meena. The way of observing both the cultures and the people is presented through the point of view of the girl. Hybridity enables her to analyze the two cultures and to choose what suits her as per the expectations of the society. Meena likes the Brummie accent to assert her belonging in the host land. Her linguistic adoption enables her easy merging with the English society. But she is also aware of her mother's restriction on using any awful English words or phrases at home. Sense of displacement of Meena is shown by the author through her colloquial and vernacular lexis. For instance, Meena remarks that her mother advises her not to adopt unwanted English words which are restricted at home and she also insists, "You take best from their culture, not the worst" (AM 53) The language plays a vital role in reflecting the culture of the people.

Meena's mother Daljit is wary of adopting of the culture of the host land. She is always concerned about her daughter who could easily acquire it as her friends and neighbours are natives of Tollington. The 'culture shock' is more intense with the first generation than with the second generation migrants. Meena's mother, Daljit, grudges the English way of life. She is concerned deeply about her neighbour Mrs. Worrall who is living with her paralyzed husband whereas their three sons are living far away in Wolverhampton and never visits them. She says to Meena that she cannot understand the English people who, in the name of civilization, enjoy their life but abandon their elders.

It transparently shows that the first generation migrants Daljit is against the culture of the host land. She cannot adopt the English way of life in its entirety. The novel begins with the memories of the narrator Meena that introduces her parents who have migrated to Britain with 'blinking back tears of gratitude and heartbreak'. But struggles and disillusion mark their early years in the adopted land. Daljit remains 'a simple Punjabi girl suffering from culture shock, marooned and misplaced in Wolverhampton'(AM 9). Later, they gradually fix up their place in the white society. But, still, she has the habit of wearing Punjabi outfits: sarees, salwar kameez and jewels during the evening parties in their home when most of their Indian friends take part with the same Indian attire and she wears the western costume when she goes for her job. The English practice in her home is viewed as strange by her. Meena comments that she has never seen her mother using the oven. Daljit actually uses it as 'a storage space for pans and her griddle on which she made chapatti. Punjabis and baking don't go together' (AM 62).



As a second generation character, Meena's way of observing the homeland is not as much intimate as that of others. She describes her relatives who are shown by her father through photos. She expresses the word 'litaney' and the phrase 'forced to memorise' which illustrate how Meena visualizes her relatives and reveals her feeling of boredom of memorizing them because of her father's compulsion. She has this kind of attitude because she has not met them in person. She realizes their importance and the role that they play in their life through her parents. She hates their relatives because of their intervention in her upbringing. It is also clear that the Indian relatives do not like Meena with her foreign life style or behaviour. Meena's aunties also comment on her behaviour. It exposes the typical Indian tradition: whether it is extended or nuclear family, relatives play a vital role in the upbringing of an Indian child in a foreign land and it points to the existence of a well-structured society in India.

The existence of ethnic group in the novel can be easily perceived. The protagonist Meena's family is regularly visited by family friends who are Indians. Meena claims that during their thirteen years of residing in Tollington, "every weekend was taken up with visiting Indian families or being invaded by them" (AM 29). She is also made to call them 'Aunties and Uncles' though they are not related to her by blood. Whenever they enter their home, she welcomes them by saying 'Namaste Auntie, Namaste Uncle'. The English neighbours stare 'tight lipped' at the walk-in and walk-out of the Indian women with jewellery, embroidered saris and the way they hold up their saris from the dirt floor. Her uncles and her father sing their favourite Urdu *ghazals* and Punjabi folk songs '*Ni babhi mere guthe na keree*' and the other men join them by singing the refrain, women use utensils, pans, 'even using the bangles on their wrists, to keep a beat going' (AM 72). The large congregation of Indian families has the same historical background. The collective memory and myth are abundantly evident in this novel.

Syal has not missed out the history of India in her novel. Though the flashbacks of Indian history do not help in the development of the plot, they help Meena to get to know about her country of origin. Syal brings in India's Partition. Indian visitors help Syal to picture the struggles which the Indians had made during the Partition. During one of the home parties, members of the Indian families slowly come out with their personal experiences during the communal riots in India. One of the family friends of Meena, Auntie Mumtaz who describes her sufferings thus, "All the time we were walking, mama and I, papa was lying dead, his head cut off from his body." (AM 73) Another person, Uncle Bhatnagar, adds his own flashback story to that of Auntie Mumtaz.

Yet another experience is recalled by Auntie Shaila whose sister Sumi had been taken away by Muslims during the Partition. Meena's father also joins in. He recollects how he, along with his seven siblings, was smuggled by his father from Lahore which had turned to "Pakistan within a split second of the announcement" (AM 74). He expresses his frightful



experience of witnessing the murder of a *Musselman* by the Hindu *goondas*. Through these sorrowful stories Syal brings out the truth how the split in India has affected both the Hindu and the Muslim people. It is to be noted that the group of family friends consists of both Muslims and Hindus and they are showing their concern towards each other when they hear their common history. The common history enables them to be knitted together which forms an ethnic group in the host land and nostalgia of their home land lingers in their minds forever.

Syal's description of flashback scenes happening in India brings the country of origin to alive to the mind of Meena who has been ignorant about them. Meena's mother also has nostalgia for her home, a village near Chandigarh, India. The description of the ancestral home presents the ardor of Daljit for her homeland: milking goat, cobra beneath the grasses, Muslim neighbours who offered her family sweetmeats during festivals "to emphasise how the land they shared was more important than the religious difference that would soon tear the Punjab in two." (AM 35). The reminiscence of her homeland brings out her happiness something which she is not enjoying in the adopted land. The narrator compares the home land and the host land to picturize the transition of the other Indian female characters to modern or to western as well as the longings of Indian lady Daljit for the home land ambience in host land. The descriptions of the ancestral home in India are meant for visualization of the second generation migration Meena. She has never visited her country of origin in her life but she is expecting and feeling excited about to spend a vacation there. But she is disappointed as she meets with an accident that takes away her vacation period. Meena feels jealous about her mother's life in India as there is no part played by her in that past.

Rabinder Powar remarks, "Meena's 'homing desire' is the desire of all those who have no idea of home or homeland" (161) Their yearning may sometimes bring them disappointment when they are observed as strangers to their own culture. Meena feels it when she hears her parents' nostalgic stories. Meena's feeling of strangeness represents most of the British born Asians who possess different identities which lead them to perplexity in placing themselves in their cultures of origin. When they fail in placing themselves in their own cultures, it is obvious that they are stuck between two cultures. Uma Parameshwaran, writer and critic, has put it aptly saying that the people who immigrate to other country are not only occupying other's place but also put their offspring into 'liminality, an uneasy pull between two cultures' (np). This can be observed in the case of the protagonist Meena.

When religious beliefs of migrants, like their cultural shock, are considered, like the cultural shock, they feel that they are separated from the host society with respect to their religion. The majority of the migrants are not ready to grasp the religion practiced in the adopted land. In the novel *Anitha and Me*, it can be seen through the incidents happening between Meena's father and Mr.Ormerod. Mr.Ormerod is a hyperactive person in the local Wesleyan Methodist Church who, time and again, thrusts leaflets related to the priest's sermons into the hands of

Meena's father Kumar. Meena observes that he is trying to convert them into Christianity. She also notes that her father has refused to convert. Even the other Indian friends of Meena's family also remain in their own religions in the host land.

Conclusion:

The novel *Anita and Me* presents the facts of the first and second generation migrants in the foreign land. Aspects like the culture shock, alienation, assimilation, common history and myth, formation of ethnic group, longing for home ambience and longing to visit the imagined ancestral home, maintaining religious beliefs, divide the first and the second generation migrants. The whole novel is narrated through the first person point of view of the protagonist Meena. This narrative technique helps a lot in bringing out the psyche of Meena, who has never visited her home of origin, who imagines her land through the information she has gathered from her elders and longs to visit it and also makes out her notions of India and Indians in Tollington. So, the novel is compacted with diasporic experiences of Indian migrants and also provides many evidences for proving the continual affiliation with their homeland and its culture of the elders.

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