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Cultural Conflicts and Hyphenated Existence in Meera Syal's *Anita* and *Me*

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Abstract

A second generation immigrant in Britain and a versatile personality, Meera Syal portrays the Indian diasporas in Britain who try to preserve their Indian traditions and cultural values alive in Britain and adapt to the culture of the adopted country. This paper attempts to explore cultural conflicts and hyphenated existence of the Indian diasporas dealt in her debut novel *Anita* and *Me*. The novel is set in 1960s and the story moves round the nine year old protagonist Meena and her British friend Anita Rutter. Meena is the daughter of the Kumars the only Punjabi family living in Tollington, a mining area near Birmingham. Through the consciousness of Meena the cultural conflicts between the Indian and the British culture are presented. Meena tries hard to escape her community and become the member of general British community. To achieve this end she befriends Anita Rutter. As she grows up she experiences racial hatred at the hands of her British friends whom she loved from the core of her heart. She has also seen her parents being humiliated there. Ultimately she realizes their secondary status in Britain, and also realizes that she cannot desert her community, and decides to be a traditional Punjabi girl. Thus the immigrants are trapped between two cultures and are forced to lead a hyphenated existence.

Keywords: Immigrant, humiliation, racial hatred, alienation, rootlessness, diaspora.

Meera Syal, a second generation immigrant in Britain was born on 27 June, 1961 in Wolver hamton and grew up in Essington, a mining village (U K). A versatile personality, Syal is a writer, playwright, scriptwriter, journalist, singer, actress, producer and social activist. As a writer she portrays candidly the Indian diaspora in England whom she finds struggling to preserve their valuable ethnic traditions and also adapt to the culture of the adopted country. Her debut novel *Anita and Me* (1996) won the prestigious Betty Trask Award, and was adapted into a film in 2002 in which Syal acted brilliantly as the aunt of Meena Kumar. Her second novel *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999) also brought her laurels in the literary sphere.

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In Meera's novels women protagonists undergo the conflicts of cultures and battles of fixing identity. *Anita and Me* is a semi- autobiographical novel wherein the story revolves round Meena Kumar, a Punjabi girl and her relationship with her English neighbor, Anita Rutter as they grow up in the fictional Midland village of Tollington near Birminghamin 1960s. Meena, the nine year old girl (protagonist) is the daughter of Mr. Shyam Kumar and Mrs. Daljit Kumar, the only Punjabi family living in Tollington, a mining village. Thrown into the milieu of multi cultures she has intense desire to become the integral part of the general community. The novelist portrays Anita as a typical Tollington wench. Through the consciousness of the protagonist the novelist presents the perennial cultural conflicts experienced by the immigrants. Meena considers Anita, the local lewd beauty, her best friend and "my passport to acceptance" (148), and hopes her friendship willbring acceptance among the British girls and boys of her age and she will be a popular member of their community. She believes that Anita, "the undisputed cock of the yard" (38), who "always seemed older than her peers" (246), will give her official stamp of being one of them. She feels fortunate enough to become Anita's friend," ..I'd been having the best day of my life being Anita Rutter's new friend" (60). The novelist also delineates the upheaval of her mind caused by her brown colour. The question haunts her mind whether she will be able to have intimacy with a guy due to her brown colour. Though Anita becomes her fast friend, helps her and proves a passport to acceptance, yet betrays her too as she has intrinsic racial prejudice against the non-whites.

The novelist presents the mindset of the first generation immigrants who preserve their native culture, faith and value system in the alien country. They have get - together in each other's house every weekend. The Kumars take Indian food such a as chapattis, dal and sabzi. Mr. Kumar usually sits on the floor and eats food with fingers. They speak Punjabi at home. Other Indians when meet speak their mother tongue instead of English. Diwali is celebrated by the Kumars, and other Indians like Mr. Amman and Mrs. Shaila come to their home. They put on Indian clothes on this occasion. The protagonist says, "I glanced at my elders who looked so shiny and joyous in their best Diwali clothes" (112). She describes how they along with Uncles and Aunties celebrate Diwali at her home. Mr. Kumar being good singer would sing Urdu *ghazals* and Indian songs, and plays on harmonium, and Uncle Tendon would play on tabla. In fact, in this novel Meera Syal presents Indian microcosms in UK. The words of Charu Sharma are applicable to Meera's portrayal of Indian diaspora, "The Indian microcosms are pulsating with Indian customs and traditions; festivals and rituals; Indian music and dance; language and cuisines; dress and religion; film and art. Women play an active role in expanding various practices" (Charu Sharma 34). They believe in their own religion and also practice rituals in the adopted nation. Auntie Shaila has images of Lord Rama and Krishna and Lord Ganesha in her shrine surrounded by incense sticks, *diyas*, fruits offerings and photographs of departed souls. She offers prayers and *artis*. While talking to Meena she reveals the essence of her religion, "…that we believe whatever you do in this life will come back to you in thenext. If you are good, you will come back as a good-hearted, rich person. If you are not, you will have to pay, at some point." (93). The immigrants keep themselves abreast with

the social, political and cultural happenings taking place in their mother land. When Nanima, the mother of Mrs. Kumar, arrives in Tollington on the birth Meena's brother Sunil, they anxiously ask her about the political happenings in Delhi or activities of films in Bombay. In the words of Syal, "The rest of the evening passed in a stream of constant visitors bearing gifts of sweetmeats and homemade *sabzis*, anxious to meet one of the generation they had left behind and to catch up on the latest news from the Motherland" (201). The immigrants inculcate their native cultural values in their offspring so that the grand cultural legacy of their native country may pass on to the younger generation. The novelist mentions how Auntie Shaila's daughters and other girls of Indian origin, are "pleasant, helpful, delicate, groomed" (149) docile and obedient. The Kumars also wish their daughter to be docile, obedient and noble and imbibe the Indian value system. But she is inclined to be different. As she says, "I knew I was a freak of some kind, too mouthy, clumsy, and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench" (149-50). Her neglect to Shaila's daughters and preference to the company of British girls and boys as seen by her parents creates fear that their only daughter is "turning out to be a social deviant" (60). They also present an ideal picture of their native land before her which is situated five thousand miles away.

The Tollington area is well populated by other Asian immigrants forming Asian community with a sense of unity and affinity as they are from the third world. They are considered as others by the British people. Instead of identifying with the Asian community, Meena establishes unity with neighbouring British people of the locality. She avoids the company of typical Indian girls like Pinky and Baby, daughters of Auntie Shaila. To achieve her endi.e to be the part of British community, she takes to falsehood, pretention and fabrication. She fabricates false stories about her grandparents to impress Anita and other British girls and boys of her group. She hopes they will consider her like other English children and not stranger. She confesses, "I'm really not a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometime need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong" (10).

Meena experiences cultural conflicts as the ethnic culture, customs, traditions, and food habits are sometimes unacceptable to her. For instance, she does not like style of dress/clothing of the Asian people. On the other hand, she is attracted towards the British white women with big hats doing creative works with a pair of pruners, and "wanted to see mama in a big hat doing something creative with a pair of pruners" (16). Meena desires that their garden should be decorated with "ornamental well" (33) etc. like the gardens of the British neighbours, but her mother considers simple garden frippery as English. We notice that Meena's actions are guided by her intense desire to assimilate in the British culture, but her inability to part ways with her culture is also explicit. Once, her mother forcefully dresses Meena in bright loose outfits "dinky pleated dress" with "frills and flowers" despite her unwillingness. When confronted she tells a lie to Anita about the dress that "this was not me" (17). She is torn between the expectations of her parents that need to be fulfilled and her desire for acculturation. Her mother tells her to wear frilly skirts which she does not like. Meena always finds

herself on double paths, struggling which one to tread. Her parents wish her to be an obedient, docile and traditional Indian girl/daughter. Her mother insists Meena should learn only good habits of the host culture and avoid the bad habits." You take the best from their culture, not the worst" (53). On the other hand, she has launched a tirade against the Indianness and craves to achieve the British concept of liberty, freedom and democracy. Meena expects presents from her parents on the occasion of Diwali, their Christmas as the British children receive during Christmas.

The immigrants experience a sense of exile, alienation, rootlessness, and divided identity in the adopted country. In this novel Syal gives a true portrait of such type of existence. The Kumars along with other Asian Immigrants living in Britain often become the victims of racial abuses unleashed upon them. They are "others" (313) there. The British community makes them realize that they are outsiders, and is not willing to give them equal status. Deep rooted racial discrimination in the British people is revealed in the words of Mr. Kumar when they wish to help Anita and Tracey whose mother has run away with a butcher leaving them to their father. He says, "If they ask for help, that is different matter, but we can't just take over the way we do with our friends. Think about it please. They have their pride" (251). The immigrants with their vibrant native soul find peace and contentment in following their native values in a foreign country. Syal presents their state through delineation of Mrs. Kumar, "She did not follow the news, no telly, no radio, no inclination, being a simple Punjabi girl suffering from culture shock, marooned and misplaced in Wolverhampton" (9). People of Asian community usually get-togather in her house. But instead of staying with them, Meena runs away and gets companionship with Anita, other white girls like Sherrie, Fat Sally and boys like Sam Lowbridge, Kevin and Karlm of the locality. On the other hand, Meena's parents donot find the British culture agreeable. To her mother the British people are "*Bakwaslok*!" (55), meaning "Bloody weird people" (55). She remarks, "They treat their dogs like children, no better than their children. They expect their kids to leave home at sixteen, and if they don't they ask for rent!... They don't like bathing, and when they do, the sit in their dirty water instead of showering….. The way they wash up,they never rinse the soap off the dishes.." (33)

In the beginning, Meena is unable to understand the glory and rich cultural legacy of India. The image of India as a backward country in habited by secondary race is in her mind. But the arrival of her Nanima,and her association opens her eyes and brings about a miraculous change in her perception of India. The grandmother becomes the embodiment of motherhood and symbol of love affection, devotion, loyalty and sanctity of the family, and inculcates pride, reverence and longing for her motherland in Meena. Discrimination based race forces Meena to ponder over her existence in UK. Gradually she understands the glory of Indian culture. Prompted by her pride of her culture she serves vegetarian food to Anita and her sister in adinner party which she organizes at her home, and she also feels pride in eating food with fingers in front of English friends.

Humiliation of the immigrants is acommon phenomenon in an adopted country. Being in minority groups their cultures, social values, habits and practices are ridiculed.

Racial abuses are hurled at them. Meena's parents have experienced derogatory treatment at the hand of the British. Her mother undergoes insults while driving on road on account of being an Indian. She narrates how they have been insulted during their visit to gurudwara in Birmingham by their car being driven by her mother. Their car starts rolling back at top of the hill and it creates inconvenience toother vehicles. Meena gets out her car, and humbly requests the old lady sitting in a car to move her car a little back to rid the inconvenience. But the English lady reacts in humiliating tone "Bloody stupid wog. Stupid woggywog. Stupid" (97). Meena feels as if she has been punched. She is haunted by this incident whole day, "….my mind was too full of the old lady to think of God" (98). This incident forces her to think that her father must have faced this kind of racial hatred so many times. ".. I felt right now, hurt, angry, confused, and horribly powerless because this kind of hatred could not be explained" (98). Meena gradually realizes that she is a secondary citizen in a country where she is born and reared. She considers Anita, Sam and others as her bosom friends, but young adolescent Meena feels betrayed when they show racial bias against her and unleash attacks on Asians. She senses racism when she reads the news under the headline of a newspaper MAN ATTACKED IN TOLLINGTON, "The victim, a Mr. Rajesh Bhatra from Tettenhall was found in a ditch on the side of the Wulfrun Road. He was suffering from head injuries and broken ribs and had been robbed of his suitcase and wallet" (275). This incident forces her to ponder over her status in Britain. Her attempt for acculturation begins to weaken. She exclaims, "This was too close to home, and for the first time, I wondered if Tollington would ever truly be home again" (275). In the hospital she lying beside the bed of injured bank manager. She is confident that it is Sam who has assaulted the manager because he is an Indian. Feeling of affinity for the manger arises in her heart. She says, "Anita and I had never been meant for each other: Sam and Anita, Anita and Sam, it sounded as natural as breathing. And me and the Bank Manager, we both lay in hospital beds, whilst the boots and heels rode the highways of Tollington together, turning us into drunken, boastful anecdotes" (282).

Racial hatred is vividly presented by the novelist during the Spring Fete held there. Though Sam Lowbridge is Meena's friend, yet he cherishes hatred against the non-whites and he is supported by a large numbers of the British. His rude attitude is revealed when he opposes the decision of sending the collected charity money for African victims. He shouts at Uncle Alan, "You don't do nothing but talk, 'Uncle'. And give everything away to some darkies we've never met… This is our patch. Not some wogs' hand out" (193). It is extremely shocking for Mr. Kumar and Meena. Meena reacts, "I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach. My legs felt watery and a hot panic softened my insides tomush" (193). However, Mr. Kumar advises her, "If anyone ever says anything rude to you, first you say something back, and then you come and tell me. Is that clear? (195). He is proud of being the son of Mother India and any insult towards an Indian by the British in the name of colour, race or culture is the insult of the whole Indian nation. So he advises his daughter, "Don't give them a chance to say we're worse than they already think we are. You prove you are better. Always" (45).

The novelist reveals the traumatic experiences of the first generation of immigrants when they search for boarding and jobs in the alien country. The Uncles and Aunties during their get to-gather disclose how they had to look for a boarding house "that did not have that sign 'No Irish, Blacks or Dogs?" (165) This caption is enough to indicate status and position of Indians/people of third worldin the UK. They would say, "…You know that old trick, you ring up and get an interview in your best voice, then they see your face and suddenly the job is gone" (166). The Indian immigrants live in the margins in the adopted country and often feel threatened by the majority and wish to be the part of native land. The novelist mentions how her father and the Uncles have been upset due to Powell, an Englishman. Her father said, "That Powell Bastard with his bloody rivers' and had added, 'If he wants to send us back, let him come and damn well try!" (267).

The novelist also delineates the nostalgia of homeland and emotional bond of the Indian Diaspora in this novel. Mrs. Kumar requests her husband to return to their own country. She says, "I can't cope anymore, Shyam. Back home I would have sisters, mothers, servants…." (196). They believe that their country is the best as it the country of tolerance where people of various religions live in peace and harmony, and are proud of their homeland. Mrs. Kumar tells Meena," Here so many religions so happily co-existed in India-Budhism, Christianity, Judasim, Sikhism and specially Islam. There are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan" (92).

Meena's awareness towards racism gradually strengthens and she returns towards her community. Ultimately she realizes that she cannot rid her community in this alien country. We see the awakened Meena boldly fighting for the honour of self, her community, and her people in attacking Sam her friend who has been hurling racial abuses against the blacks and the Asians — the Indians and Pakistanis. She shouts at Sam, "You mean the others like the Bank Manager? The man from the building site. The Indian man. I know you did it. I *am* the others, Sam. You did mean me" (313-14).

We see a radical change in Meena's attitude. She promises that she will remain the part of her family try to fulfill the aspirations of her parents. A sense of realization comes to her how much her parents have undergone humiliation while living in this alien milieu. She decides to discard bad habits like speaking lies, respect the sentiments of her parents and grow feminine like other Indian girls in her locality. She also decides to write letters to her relatives in India, become an ideal woman like other Indian women and respect Indian values. As she declares, "…I would grow my hair long and vaguely feminine, I would be nice to Pinky and Baby and seek out their company willingly, I would write letters to India and introduce myself properly to that anonymous army of blood relatives, I would learn to knit, probably, and I would always tell the truth" (284). The novelist thus presents the change of her heart and mind. She says, "I climbed into bed and for the first time in years, said a prayer. I told God I was sorry for blaming Pinky and Baby for stealing Mr. Ormerod's tin and I wished fervently that they were lying next to me in their matching pyjamas and co-ordinated bed socks, listening to me telling then about Sam, because I knew that they would understand" (274). Her longing for the motherland aggravates. She underlines her purpose to explore

her parental lineage in India. Her eyes open towards the duality of identity in England. She cannot be the part of British culture despite of her birth and rearing in England. The immigrants will have to face racial prejudice.

To conclude, Syal has portrayed comprehensively the cultural conflicts and hyphenated existence of the Indian diaspora in Britain. Meena's relationship with Anita, her British friend is an attempt to achieve belongingness with general community. But she fails as she remains in the margin and is treated as other. In fact, she feels that the immigrants cannot completely assimilate the foreign culture because they are treated as others by the British and often undergo humiliation in the adopted land. They toocherish their ethnic and cultural values in their heart. Thus they live psychologically, culturally and geographically in two worlds, and always experience the pull between the two cultures.

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