

Interrogating the Identity Crises of Second Generation Diaspora

in Meera Syal's

Anita and Me

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Abstract-

The phenomenon of worldwide dispersion of people in the present century is paving way to the concept of global citizenship. The diasporan experience is also evolving in its scope to encompass not just the experiences of marginalized community but to take into account their impact on the world economy, sociology and society formation. The women diaspora today claim a distinguished place on global platforms not just as the transmitter of values but as a mouthpiece for evolution, change and liberty. The hegemonic practices of both East and West are rendered bare in the works of present day women diasporic authors. The impact of multicultural surroundings on the identity formation of diaspora and in particular the second generation diaspora has become a much conversed topic of diasporic discussions. The present paper will discuss the multicultural impression on the identity formation of Meera Syal's protagonist Meena in her celebrated work *Anita and Me*(1996).

Key Words: Diaspora, Hegemony, Patriarchy, Identity Crises, Assimilation, Acculturation, Parental Influence, Parental Concerns, Doubly Marginalized Status of Women, Nostalgia and Hybridity.

Meera Syal in her debut novel *Anita and Me* captures the experiences of a young girl of ten years Meena who is caught in the tussle between the influence of her Indian Punjabi family and her white friends in a small mining village of Britain Tollington. The focus of Meera

Syal in her creative writings is on the sensibility and contradictory attitudes of first and second generation diaspora and in particular women diaspora.

In her novel *Anita and Me* she projects the difference in the perception of Meena and her conservative parents Daljit and Shyam Kumar. Meena is the only daughter of Kumar's and is pampered by them. They give her the liberty to explore the West but with strict parental vigilance. Meena feels claustrophobic in their scrutiny and rejects the Punjabi traditions, festivals as 'dead boring'. The concept of ghettos irritates her when she witnesses the individualistic life of her English neighborhood.

A second generation diaspora-Meena prefers the Western culture and is very comfortable with it, it's her home, where she was born and grew into what she is today. She loves the local community and has affection for her local neighborhood. The difference in their native festivals confuses her. Meena prefers Christmas to Diwali, which for her is 'dead boring'(99). Mr. and Mrs. Kumar, on the contrary, celebrate Christmas with equal enthusiasm so that Meena doesn't feel left out.

The limited recognition of western values and traditions proves to be the main reason of Meena's confusion in integrating the dual cultural influences. Meena is attracted to the western culture but the Indian roots in her upbringing make her aware of her multicultural self. She is astounded to see that her family celebrates Christmas but her western surrounding is oblivious about the festival of Diwali. Meena's life is further complicated by the western influence that her white friend Anita brings on to her. Anita becomes Meena's role model whom she desires to follow throughout her life.

The life that Anita leads is full of liberty, excitement, without any restriction and parental control which Meena idolizes and envies. For her friendship with Anita, Meena is ready to sacrifice everything that is Indian. This friendship and attraction for the western mode of living distances her from her father Shyam whom Meena loves dearly. The involvement with anything Indian generated a sense of embarrassment in Meena. The crisis of belonging and roots, insider and outsider obscures the path of her identity formation.

Meena being a second generation diaspora wants to be accepted in the mainstream western society the way Anita is but her Caucasian race is evident in the color of her skin. The markers of Asian identity mar her identity formation in the age of innocence. She wants to 'shed (her) body like a snake slithering out of its skin and emerge reborn, pink and

unrecognizable.’(146). The realization of her place in the West as an outsider ‘Other’ is very troublesome. Meena feels privileged in the company of Anita but the dominant white group of children rejects her. Anita is a flirtatious girl who enjoys the company of boys but Meena due to her color is dismissed even in the insignificant game of flirting.

The frustration from being left out from the group of people whom Meena considers her friend forces her to write a query into her favorite magazine *Jackie*. She wants to have a solution for her crises of acceptance and social refusal. The quest for assimilation and acceptance forms an integral part of her identity formation. During the crucial process of ‘growing up’ and ‘individualization’(Guerin 137) to use Wilfred Guerin’s terms the reality of being an Indian gradually unfolds before the second generation diaspora who are at home in West and similarly it unveiled for Meena. She feels at home in Tollington which in reality is just place which her parents inhabited for financial security.

The affinity with the West and growing embarrassment of having Indian roots pressurizes Meena to challenge the roots of her origin. The pressure of reforming, reshaping and re-envisaging her identity among her peer group drives Meena to a state of disappointment and hopelessness. ‘Identity is marked by similarity that is of the people like us and by difference of those who are not.’(Woodward 7).

The predicament that Meena faces in the process of her identity formation and her attraction for the West forms a major reason for her parents especially Daljit. The first generation diaspora are well aware of the racial undercurrents that are prevalent in the host society. The life of Kumar’s has been a constant tale of hope and hopelessness. The shadow of their ‘lost homeland’ and the cultural diversity results in their difficulty in assimilation. The efforts to intermix in the host society is frustrated by the memories of home, discrimination in host society, bitter experiences of colonization and the harsh reality of Indian partition. The country of their birth remains ‘an important emotion’ and a ‘symbol of home’(Sunramani x, xi) even in exile.

The inability to get respectable job shocks Shyam who left his homeland in search of fortune in the alien nation. The primary years of stay in Britain is accompanied with ‘struggle and disillusion’(9). Shyam compromises with his academic credentials to work in a sweatshop and Daljit moves out of her comfort zone of home to find a job as a school teacher. Mr. Kumar said, ‘ (T)he letters I wrote home, so many lies about the jobs we had, the money we

were making. My *Mamaji* still thinks that I am a college lecturer...(165). Experiences of loss, marginality, exile and homelessness are often foregrounded in their racial identity.

The respect and acceptance that the first generation diaspora desire in the host country appears a far off dream to them. The culture shock and problem in assimilation in the fabric of host nation gives rise to a perpetual homing desire in the first generation diaspora. The sharp contrast between reality and expectations results in nostalgia. 'In the first generation diaspora memory and nostalgia play an important role. They cherish and retain all the memories of their homeland.' (Aggarwal 33).

This anxiety leads to a deep frustration in Daljit and Shyam that further aggravates the identity crises in their daughter Meena. The concern to protect her from the 'bad influence' of foreign culture results in the strict vigilance on Meena. Her inability to venture in the society and to experiment as her English friends result in complicated individualization of Meena in the formative years of her identity formation. She lacks any 'direct link with India' (Alexander 116) and finds it unnatural to develop any emotional bonding with a far off nation, its traditions or with its History. The affinity with the shores of host country for the second generation diaspora transforms the notion of home for them. Meena faces the same predicament. She feels Tollington as her home where the subtle racial undercurrents confounds her.

Meena wants to break free through the boundaries of secure life that her home offers and to have some adventure. She longs for belonging; acceptance and excitement which will help her break the spiral of complicated identity and integrate her multicultural identity. Meena wants to shed off her unpopular self and emerge as an icon in the western society. When watching her favorite series 'Opportunity Knocks'(64) she finds a 'most realistic escape route from Tollington, from ordinary girl to major personality in one step.'(65). Her friendship with Anita is another part of her effort to assimilate in the cultural fabric of West. She cherishes the dream of having a house in London with her white friend Anita.

The discomfort that Meena feels for her Indian roots, however, appears exotic to her friends Anita and Sam. They find it exotic. The pull of Anita towards foreign culture of Meena's family is apparent when she finds her traditional outfits '...boosting'(256). The tale of attraction and repulsion, acceptance and rejection results in Meena's identity predicament. She finds herself torn between the sophisticated world of her middle class parents and easy

going attitude of her white class working neighborhood. The resultant outcome is a clash between 'Indian responsibility and western liberalism.' (Hussain 123).

The tug of war lands Meena in a space where she inhabits two parallel worlds which is different from each other in terms of culture, religion and her personal preferences for British society and family that signifies home. The location of Meena in two unidentical worlds and its simultaneous impression on her identity formation results in her deflated loyalties, ambiguous perception of her place in the host nation as an immigrated Indian.

The inability to relate with the tales of systematic exploitation that Indian faced in hands of British during the period of Colonization is another handicap that results in a difference in perception of Meena and her family. Meena feels smothered when her parents persistently tell her that 'education is her passport' and her extended family of *Uncle and Aunties* ceaselessly work to transform her into a 'good girl'. The gradual clarity in perception makes the racial discrimination under the garb of progressive British society evident to Meena. In one incident when she was going to a Gurudwara with her mother they are referred as 'stupid wog' (97). She tries to make a balance between her British nationality and Indian roots but the sub conscious identity which is not able to balance both complicates her expectations. Her attempts to enjoy Anita's company are also perturbed with the reference that Tracy had named her dog-Nigger. Nigger is a black Negro and it's a hindi synonym for her father's name Shyam. Apparently racism is a big issue that obscures the identity formation in Meena. She is an Indian but mentally she belongs to Britain. She cannot identify herself or her family with the projection of Asians as, 'Barely literate, perpetually grinning idiots' (216) often shown in the T.V. comedies.

The lost link with the homeland is however established in Meena's life with the arrival of her *nanima*. This connection proves a solidifying factor between the weak links of Meena with her nation and her parents. It is only after the arrival of Meena's maternal grandmother that she develops the appreciation for her roots and acknowledges the efforts of her parents. Nanima enables Meena to enhance her confidence and independence. It is in the presence of nanima and her wisdom that Meena takes her 'second birth'-unbiased, resolute and wise. The essence of the native values that nanima brings with re helps Meena to reconsider her loyalties and friendship. The ability of Meena to see through the underlying racism improves.

She feels ‘hurt, angry, confused and powerless because this kind of hatred could not be explained.’(97)

Meena’s improved vision renders her capable of perceiving the dark realities of her relationship with Anita, which is indeed a bad influence for her. Meena’s falling from the pony and landing in hospital is a significant episode that leads to her integrated identity formation, clarity in perception and personality. A major change takes place in her mentality when she finally decides, ‘there and then to heal myself (herself), both body and mind.’(284). The encounter with Robert in the hospital proves to be a turning point in her life. Robert, her friend/boyfriend enables her to further strengthen her individuality and unbiased her preferences. The path of Meena’s identity formation is not easy so he admonishes her ‘to mind the road’(286). In the final episode of her recovery from the fractured leg in the hospital Meena reconciles the fractured bits of her identity into an integrated, unique whole.

Meena’s growth in terms of her experiences transforms her into a good loving girl who has the ability to understand and feel the compassion of her parents. She gradually ‘...detaches herself from her sub-urban locality to take up the more familiar in-between position’ (Procter 142). She evolves as an individual and realizes that whatever has happened to her must have ‘happened to papa countless times’ (98).

Meena accepts the dictum of her parents and makes education as her too to make strides on the soil of her adopted nation. The process of Meena’s self actualization moves from feeling stiffened in the protective embrace of her family and evolves to embrace her multiethnic, multicultural identity. In the persona of Meena Meera Syal has delineated the complex process of identity formation in the second generation diaspora. The gradual development in the plot renders Meena to accept her hyphenated identity. She- a second generation diaspora grows to shed off her illusion of complete British identity and boldly accepts her in-between place.

The process of growing up has never been uniform for these hybrids, but a continuous journey from early identification with the host culture to the acceptance of their identity as Indo-Britishers. In the formative years of Meena the concurrent existence of two contrasting cultures pose a challenge to her. It is only through her friendship with Anita and later with the arrival of her nanima that Meena undergoes evolution to acknowledge the difference and accept her hybrid self. The journey of Meena from innocence to mature acceptance of her

hybrid self reveals the dilemma, perplexities, hope and hopelessness of both first and second generation diaspora.

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