

SITUATING IDENTITY WITHIN MEERA SYAL'S *ANITA AND ME*

Priti Das,

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Women's College, Tinsukia

Email: pritidasprokriti@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Recent developments in the field of literature are really a noteworthy one because the focus of literature has been to highlight some of the recent changes going on in the society. One such area of study which has made immense progress is the area of diasporic study. People have migrated to different countries from their native countries and settled there in the hope of a better life. In the process of doing so, they carry with them memories of their people, culture and tradition along with them. The nostalgia that accompanies them molds their identity to a great extent. One such prominent writer who has made a humble attempt to the field of diaspora studies is Meera Syal. Her breakthrough novel *Anita and Me* is partly semi-autobiographical as it focuses on the effect of migration on subsequent generation of migrants. This paper will attempt to show how the effect of migration varies from generation to generation.

Key words: Diaspora, migration, nostalgia, identity, memory

INTRODUCTION:

Diaspora is a term which has taken the limelight not only in genres such as that of social science but also in literary studies it has been a major theme taken into account in fictional and non-fictional narratives. Often diaspora is seen as given communities which is an extension of an ethnic or national group. However, diaspora must be considered as imagined community which is in the process of reconstitution. The origin of the term 'diaspora' has been a major source of study for academicians. In the year 1991, William Safran mentioned that the concept of 'diaspora' can be linked to those communities which share certain characteristics:

- a) The original community must disperse to two or more countries from their homeland. Moreover, even after moving away from their homeland the communities must be linked to their homeland through the memories and cultures associated with it.
- b) In the host country, they believe that their culture or tradition will not be accepted; therefore, they reconstitute their individual habits.
- c) They or their descendants will return to the homeland should the conditions prove favourable;
- d) They should continue to maintain support for homeland and therefore the communal consciousness and solidarity enables them to continue these activities (Safran 1991, 83-84)

The characteristics mentioned by Safran show that the diasporic communities feel marginalized and alienated in the host countries. They always have a memory of their homeland within them and they want to move back to their homeland at one point of their life.

IDENTITY CRISIS IN ANITA AND ME:

Anita and Me by Meera Syal is one of the most enlightening novels which highlights on the issue of diaspora faced by the Indians residing in England. Meera Syal was born and brought up in Wolverhampton to Punjabi parents. This novel is a semi-autobiographical novel by Syal where she depicts some of her instances which she had faced as an Indian migrant. Throughout the novel, it can be noticed that through the characters she highlights on diasporic issues such as culture shock, alienation, assimilation, nostalgia, identity crisis, longing for homeland. The novel shows how the migrants from a land cannot completely abandon their cultural values while staying in another country. The migrants therefore cannot completely assimilate themselves to the foreign culture. In this way, they often face identity crisis because their 'self' is often reliant to accept the behaviors and habits of the foreign culture. In case, some of the people who allow themselves to assimilate to the foreign culture begin producing hybrid characteristics.

The novel deals with the life of a nine-year-old girl named Meena Kumar who is a second-generation migrant from India. Through the novel, Meera Syal depicts the experiences of a second-generation migrant that are in a dilemma regarding their nationality. This dilemma of nationality also raises question regarding their identity. The story takes place in a fictional village of England known as Tollington which is basically a mining village. The Indians residing in this village are the minorities and have formed a sort of society amongst themselves. Even after residing in England for many years, they have never looked to imitate the English accent or follow the British tradition. In fact, they have always wanted a space where they can place themselves within their own limits. They have set their own boundary within which they can find the satisfaction of being an Indian amidst the foreigners.

Meena's 'self' is always in the process of becoming another in the village Tollington because the people surrounding her are mostly the Whites who treat her as a subaltern in their area. In postcolonial studies, the concepts of 'self' and 'other' have gained prominence in recent times. According to *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, "One of the more dominant aspects of human experience is the compelling sense of one's unique existence, what philosophers have traditionally called the issue of personal identity or of the self." (81) The concept of 'other' is originally attributed to Hegel in his seminal work *Phenomenology of Spirit* where he states that 'self' is recognized by an individual as that which is solely controlled by them both at cognitive, affective and psychomotor levels. The 'other' on the other hand is uncontrolled by these factors. The complexity increases when the 'self' comes in contact with more than multiple 'others'. In this position the self tends to exert a force which causes the self to identify with or behave as an 'other'. (Hegel 10) Hegel mentioned in his seminal work that the consciousness of an 'other' is the very condition for the emergence of an individual self. In the case of Meena too it can be noticed that her 'self' encounters multiple 'others' in the village and therefore she feels somewhat unique about her existence. Therefore, her personal identity is in a dilemma regarding how it should mould itself. There are only very few possibilities that the natives accept the migrants as one of them. One such incident occurs when Sandy, a local in the village is helped by Meena's mother Daljit. He becomes so humbled by this gesture that he comments "You're so lovely. You know, I never think you as, you know, foreign. You're just like one of us." (29).

Sigmund Freud's concept of unconscious as discussed in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* is also a significant terminology in the "self" and "other" debate. (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 87) According to Freud, the dwelling place of the unconscious in the mind of an individual was below the level of consciousness. It stayed

away from the outer reality as much as it can. It is always in quest for pleasure from the outer reality. It contained the significant memories, infantile experiences and traumas from the past. Memory signifies both 'personal' and 'cultural' identity. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, memory is "[t]he faculty by which things are remembered; the capacity for retaining, perpetuating or reviving the thought of things past". (78) Both personal and collective memories have a close relationship with each other. Collective memory signifies a shared pool of information which is held in the memories of two or more members of a group, whereas personal memory is confined to an individual self. In case of Meena too she desires to be a British girl because she has noticed the racial discrimination received by the Indians in England. Her memories both 'personal' and 'cultural' never allow her to form a coherent identity. It is only to escape the personal and collective memories contained within her which is mostly filled with trauma of being an outsider she decides to align herself with a local white girl named Anita Rutter. She considers Anita as her ideal because she feels that by aligning with her, she can make her identity stronger. She tries to get as much closer she can with Anita but when she learns that Anita is a wicked girl in terms of her character, she distances herself from her. This proves that her personal memory has some good impulses from her native culture which does not permit her to destroy her 'self' in the process of becoming an 'other'.

The collective memory of Meena's mother Daljit is very strong because the past memories of her homeland never allow her to become an 'other' in a foreign land. She is very conscious regarding her dress as she wears tradition Indian dress and also never follows the English accent. She speaks English in her own Indian accent. Daljit is also connected with her ancestral village in Punjab through the food that she prepares. She does not like to waste money on the outside food items and therefore cultivates the herbs for the meal for the family in her own garden. Unlike her parents however Meena's behavior is a cause of concern for both Daljit and her husband. She is not eager to accept the Indian style of living in Tollington. She questions the traditional lifestyle and often misbehaves in front of the relatives to show the superiority of Western lifestyle. She has to conceal her true identity before her parents and depict a different identity in front of them so that they don't get hurt by her true 'self'. It is only after the arrival of her grandmother Nanima she finds the self-confidence to express herself openly. She also gains the confidence to judge things from the right perspective. Berthold Schoene Harwood in *Beyond (T) race: Bildung and Proprception in Meera Syal's Anita and Me* mentions that "In Meena's case hybridity signifies a state of not being able to fully meet the standards of either culture". (46). In the text it is noticed that Meena begins to distance herself from the culture of her family in order to assimilate into the English culture, but later on she finds that she is in the wrong path and starts abandoning the path shown by her English friend Anita. Towards the later part of the novel, it is noticed that Meena is happy with her own native culture. Various factors also contribute towards Meena realizing the value of her own culture. The encounter with the Indian man in the Big House, the arrival of her grandmother from India and also her stay at the hospital where she encounters a boy with whom she becomes deeply attached makes her self-reflect about her life. It is at that moment she decides that she needs to fix her identity and give it a proper direction.

Language also has a major role to play in the development of one's identity. It is through language only that an individual can assert their proper identity. The same case happens with Meena too. She believes that only by adopting the linguistic accent of Anita, she can come closer to her. She wants to be accepted in the English society. In spite of her mother's warning to not follow the bad habits of the English society, she does not pay heed to it.

Therefore, she comments to Meena that “You take best from their culture, not the worst.” (53) The culture shock is very much prominent in case of first-generation migrants such as that of Daljit. In the beginning of the novel, it is mentioned that “Daljit remains ‘a simple Punjabi girl suffering from culture shock, marooned and misplaced in Wolverhampton.’ (9) However, the second generation of migrants such as Meena is not deeply attached towards their relatives so closely. Therefore, she uses words such as ‘litany’ and phrase such as ‘forced to memorize’ while describing her relatives. So, it can be deciphered that the identity of Meena wants to be shaped through the environment in which she is born and brought up. She has never seen her relatives in person and therefore her ‘self’ does not feel attached towards them. The collective memories of the parents of Meena are attached through Indian tradition and become prominent when they share it with the other Indians residing in Tollington. Their identity is generated to a great extent through the traditions and cultures of their native nation.

CONCLUSION:

Anita and Me is a highly impactful novel which highlights the impact of migration upon the identity of different generation of individuals. It takes into account the fact that the identity of the first generation of migrants will be more directly affected by the memories and cultures of their native nation than the next generation of individuals. Since, the second or third generation of migrants has not directly encountered the cultures and traditions of the native nation, they have only heard about it through flashbacks described by their family members, they are less likely to feel the bonding with their native nation. Therefore, their identity is molded mainly through the experiences encountered in the host country. They do not want their ‘self’ to be considered as an ‘other’ in the host country. The character of Meena in the novel showcases the feelings of a second-generation migrant towards their native nation in a realistic manner. She is very critical of the lifestyle of her parents as well as the relatives and therefore often demeans them in order to show the superiority of the culture and language of England. Through the novel Meera Syal has covered all the diasporic experiences encountered by the migrants in a very realistic manner. It also shows the lineage of the migrants with their host nation in a very impactful manner.

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