

# **Cultural Sensitivity in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me***

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The world becomes a global village. Every nation is like an island. In the past, people did not require to communicate with people of other cultures like nowadays. They travel from their own countries to other countries for employment, business, tourism, etc. They need to communicate with people from various cultures. So, they have to be aware of the fact that cultures differ in several ways. A practice that is considered to be acceptable and respectful in one culture and it may not be considered so in another culture.

Literature represents the aspects of the culture and its origin. It can be used as a rich resource to develop an ability to communicate appropriately in alien cultural settings. Culture is like gravity. People do not experience it if they leap into the air. It jolts them out of their complacency when they are uprooted from their own environment and planted into another, either temporarily or permanently. It is attached with them from womb to tomb. Though, they can assimilate themselves into

their adopted culture to some extent, their own culture stays with them permanently. It follows them like their own shadow.

Cultural sensitivity is a skill that helps the people to learn about various kinds of people and understand others who come from a different cultural background. It's not always possible to understand their backgrounds. But a diverse population lives together in the same communities. They don't consider one culture better or worse, and right or wrong. People have to recognize that their culture is no better than any other culture. It can take time to build a high level of cultural sensitivity.

This paper is entitled as "Cultural Sensitivity in Meera Syal's Novel *Anita and Me*". It reveals the cultural sensitivity of emigrant characters like the first-generation mother Daljit and the second-generation daughter Meena in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*.

Meera Syal is a British novelist of many talents. Meera Syal's debut novel *Anita and Me* explores the conundrums of identity faced by two generations of Indian migrants in Britain. They are struggling to find and retain their ethnic identity in a multicultural society. She successfully explores the contradictions inherent in growing up in Britain with immigrant Asian parents, and in living between two cultures.

This novel portrays the life of a young Indian immigrant girl growing up in the English Midlands. The new environment appears strange and alien to the immigrants. Meena's parents moved to Britain because of a sudden attack in the "dusty Indian village" (9). In Britain their eyes are filled with tears of comfort as the fog cleared to reveal "the sign they had been

waiting for, dreaming of, the sign planted in tarmac and emblazoned in triumphant hues of red, blue, and white, the sign that said simply, WELCOME TO BRITAIN" (9).

Meena's parents had come from Punjab to England. Meena's mother Daljit as she stepped off the bus in Tollington sees the "fields and trees, light and space, and a horizon that welcomed the sky which, on a warm night and through squinted eyes, could almost look something like home" (35). Their search for peace and comfort appeared complete at the moment.

Cultural sensitivity is made to be felt by Daljit. She suffers much because of the difference in cultures. She is "a simple Punjabi girl suffering from cultural shock, marooned and misplaced in Wolverhampton" (9). Anyhow she tries to cope with the new atmosphere. Meena's parents begin to live their new life in Tollington. Daljit, the Indian woman, carries her cultural and religious baggage to Tollington. She accepts and adopts herself to the new culture.

The mass settlement in Tollington gives rise to cultural sensitivity. The garden in front of Meena's house is different when compared to other gardens. As a child growing in the immigrant land Meena observes that their garden is "odd one out in the village" (15) because her mother grew mint, thunia, coriander and lemon verbena etc to garnish their Indian meals. Daljit explains to Meena "this one thunia... coriander I mean... this lemon verbena, you can make tea from this..." (16). She feels that their lifestyle was odd from the rest of the residents. Meena dislikes these herbal plants in her garden. She longed to grow roses and sunflowers like Mr. Topsy. He lived in India for

ten years. He tells Nanima and Meena that, "I served in India. Ten years. Magical country. Magical people. The best" (222).

Cultural sensitivity acquires in Meena, "we were the only Indian that had ever lived in Tollington" (22) and she comments that the country England looked green. Kumar worked in Tollington with the English people. Daljit is working as an infants' teacher in the adjoining school. She wears sari and without changing her traditional costume and food habits she has lived in the migrant land peacefully. They are sensitivity towards their culture. Meena, the nine-year-old girl does not know why her parents are different from others. But she gradually gets the answer.

Meena's family mingles with the English people. "Whenever we went 'out', out meaning whenever English people were, as opposed to Indian friends' houses which in any case was always 'in' . . . (25). They interact with each other, eaten food and watched television together. It is Meena's parents who dressed in the most impressive way.

Meena's Aunties perceives that cultural sensitivity appears when the English people treated their own children as inhuman. They sent their children out of the house at the age of sixteen. If not, they must pay the rent to their parents. "'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! Rent from your kids!" (34) These Aunties make a journey from the civilized side of Wolverhampton. They complained to Meena that the immigrant land was not good when compared to India.

Anita Rutter's mom Deirdre runs away with a butcher leaving a note. She does not care about her children. Anita was dead upset and cried. Their interjected mama has been looking after Anita and Tracey. English culture is much different from Indian culture. The English does not care about their children. They easily leave their children without having any affection. But Indians are not like that.

In their village, Sandy, a divorcee, has a son named Mikey. While speaking with Daljit she has praises Daljit: "you're so lovely. You know, I never think of you as, you know, foreign, you're just like one of us" (29). Meena's family has been living there for thirteen years. They learnt to regard the new land as their home as in the song of Moses "... the place that you, Lord, have chosen for your home..." Exodus 15:17(b). Every weekend they have visited Indian families and also received such invitation from them. Their back-door English neighbour has invited them only once.

Meena's parents while reflecting upon their past life, confirms that "they were not the only who were living out this unfolding adventure" (31). Many people have emigrated from India, like them. They have taken a photo on the day of their parting.

Mrs.Christmas has three grown-up sons and a few grandchildren. But they lived far away. So she talks to Daljit and they shared their past suffering. Culture sensitivity deepens when Meena hears their speech. It had made Meena to feel special as "if our destiny, our legacy, was a much more interesting journey than the apparent dead ends facing our neighbours" (59).

Soon after that, Mrs. Christmas has been dies of Cancer. Then, after three weeks, Mr. Christmas also dies in his sleep. Daljit attends the funeral agonizing "to wear white, as in traditional Hindu mourning and thus risk upsetting the conventional mourners... or stick to black, the only black garments". But at last she wears grey to the funeral. She had a hesitation in herself, because cultural sensitivity to Daljit. She never knew about the emigrated mourning culture.

Meena had not visited India. She says "I knew that my parents had not been back there since before I was born..." (263). But her papa's songs make her to feel that "I could speak in my sleep, in my dreams, evocative of a country I had never known. The songs made me realise that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England" (112).

Meena's suffering is different in Tollington Village, an emigrant land, because the village boys never noticed her. They noticed only Anita. So she is in need of a solution. Every Thursday Jackie magazine delivered the 'Cathy and Claire' column which always helped her. It is a revelation and relief to her. But no other readers shared her dilemma. She is culturally sensitive towards the incident and so she begins to write about her own feelings in the magazine. So she decides to write as: "Dear Cathy and Claire, I am brown, although I do not wear thick glasses. Will this stop me getting a guy? Yours, Tense Nervous Headache from Tollington"(145). Their reply was "always smile, a guy does not want to waste his time with a miserable face ... BE YOURSELF!"(146). Her parents never taught her about the emigrated culture. So she had a hesitation to speak or mingle with the whites.

After that she sings a song about a sultry moon lit night. It is a romantic song. Shaila appreciates her song thus: "va! She sings Punjabi with a Birmingham accent! Damn cute, really! " (114). Emigrated People from India like Daljit, Kumar, Shaila, and Nanima often spoke Punjabi. Meena cannot understand the language. When they discuss anything in secret they use this language. This language is an indoor language to them. Meena also picks up that language somewhat slowly.

As Daljit sees the sky through the window, she expresses her doubt: "It's the same sky... The same sky in India. It's hard to believe, isn't it? "She is missing India very much and so she sees the stars and relates it to her family members as "I would have sisters, mothers, servants...The stars were her family, his family, she was crossing them off one, naming them to keep them alive" (196). The critic Iqbal S. Sekhon said that "the Punjabis have their own interesting myths to tell about the stars after death and occupy a high place in the sky" (78).

Cultural sensitivity of racism emerges through the act of Anita's mother. Deirdre is the mother of Anita and Tracey, she called her dog as "Nigger! Nigger! Here,darling! Come to mummy!" (90) These words insulted Daljit and she becomes unfriendly with Deirdre. "Since discovering how she had chosen to name their piddly poodle" (214). Daljit is also insulted by the attitude of the paint shop in Tollington, "They had a colour called Nigger Brown" (90). She asked Kumar sensitively to tell the difference between an Indian and a Jamaican. She has really felt very bad in the racial situation. According to International Encyclopedia of Sociology,

Racism refers to belief that one race is superior to other races in significant ways and the superior race is entitled, by virtue of its superiority, to dominate over other races and to enjoy a larger share of society's wealth and status. (1086)

Meena's Nanima is the mother of Daljit, who had come from India. When she has arrived in Tollington, there, the Welcoming Committee has been made up of Daljit, Shalia, her husband Amman, their children Pinky and Baby, and especially Meena and her brother Sunil. All of them are rushed into the garden shouting and waving. Shalia anointed their front step with oil as a traditional gesture of welcome. Syal presents the different culture and tradition of the two countries in her novel excellently. The displaced Indian families have taken their culture and tradition to with them, wherever they have gone.

Meena's parents are ready to leave Tollington village and to move to a place which is nearby Meena's grammar school. Shalia encourages them thus: "Now you're in a nice area and half your neighbours are Hindu so they'll have one of their own" (327-328). Meena regrets that the exam was not a mere exam. "If I failed, my parents' five-thousand-mile journey would have all been for nothing" (213). Her mother, Daljit has confidence on Meena, "She will pass it, no problem. She's my daughter" (303).

According to Poornima Apte, "Syal does a wonderful job of describing Meena's slow realization of her place in the country that is her home. In the end, Meena matures into an adolescent and discovers where her loyalties lie." And later

she has changed her character, influenced by the words of Robert, a new friend in the hospital, he who says "Mind the road!" (293). The simple advice becomes the guiding words to her. Then, she asks Daljit to bring all her school books to prepare for the eleven – plus, she is also ready to grow her hair long. She is also ready to write letter to India and introduces herself as anonymous army of blood relatives. And especially, she is ready to speak the truth. She has suddenly become "the good Indian daughter" (302)

Meena writes a letter to Anita: "Dear Anita, we're moving on Saturday. I'm going to the grammar school..." (328). In India they have to pay money to thousands of greedy officials to get the seat in the top University. "That's why we had to leave, we were poor and clever, a bad combination in India" (212). Meena's says "my parents' hopes for my future, the justification for their departure from India, our possible move out of Tollington (306).

Cultural sensitivity is realized by migrated people. The migrated adults carry their past memories and histories. But like Meena who was born there to create them to explore other spaces. Migrated generation has worried about their future generation.

Thus, the novel *Anita and Me* novel is about the realization truth of cultural sensitivity. Living in their adopted countries with their innate beliefs coursing through them, they realize the difficulties and impossibilities of complete absorption.

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