



MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN MEERA SYAL'S ANITA AND ME

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ABSTRACT:

The movement of people across borders and nations is a universal and ancient phenomenon. The causes and reasons for movements or migrations can be varied. Forced migrations or displacements due to war, economic crisis, environmental calamities, slave trades, etc. are some of the common causes. But a large number of people also migrate looking for better opportunities and a better life elsewhere. Being far away from homeland, however, trigger memories as people try to stay connected to their roots somehow. In Anita and Me, we see how a Punjabi family tries to stay connected to their roots through recollections as they also try to forge a new identity in their chosen land.

Key words: Memory, Identity, Roots

A person's identity is forged through one's connection to the native land, community, culture, language, food, and a shared history. Shifting one's base to another land entails a sense of rootlessness, void, and a yearning for the lost/left native space. A major concern for any diaspora is the feeling of loss, and an identity crisis. About identity, Ulla Ambursley states that "Some identities come with birth, others are given to us, and some we require ourselves through life. One of the most important factors affecting our identity is connected to the encounters that are made throughout life. Identity is therefore, not something static but rather something that undergoes a continuous evolution" (3). Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* is the story of Meena Kumar who is a nine year old girl of Punjabi parents who migrated from India to the fictional small mining town of Tollington in England. Narrated in an autobiographical tone, Meena at the onset describes her inability to completely 'belong' to the white dominated Tollington: "... I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong" (Syal 10). The Kumar couple tries to stay connected to their roots through food, cultural practices and collective reminiscence of India along with their fellow Indian families who migrated to Britain. Meena, being a second generation immigrant, however finds it difficult to connect to India but also has to struggle to assimilate as a Briton. While she wanted "roses and sunflowers and manicured hedges" (16) in her garden, she was embarrassed by the *dhania* and *pudina* that her mother grew for garnishing their meals. But for Meena's mother it was the *dhania-pudina* and the Indian meals of *paratha*, *sabji*, and *roti* which helped her in staying connected to the roots: "This food was not just something to fill a hole, it was soul food, it was the food their far-away mothers made and came seasoned with memory and longing, this was the nearest they would get for many years, to home" (61). Being thousands

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of miles away from the homeland, the seniors build friendships with other immigrant families, and it was obvious how Meena's parents valued "these people they so readily renamed as family, faced with the loss of their own blood relations" (31). Her mother's choice of Tollington as their place of initial settlement is the result of her yearning to reside someplace which has resemblance to her village in Punjab:

But my mother knew what she wanted. When she stepped off the bus in Tollington, she did not see the outside lavvy or the apology for a garden or the medieval kitchen, she saw 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).

Meena would listen to her parents' anecdotes of Delhi, the riots after Partition, the loss and sufferings of the numerous Uncles and Aunties who lost their loved ones while sitting in their living room of Tollington. Although Meena learns about the Partition in her textbooks, the harrowing experiences of it was told and retold through the stories of these people who left their motherland to the country which was also responsible for the Partition. Being displaced from their homeland evoked their sense of belonging while triggering floods of memories: "Diaspora evokes attachments to multiple places and is a particular type of movement which is distinct from temporary and touristic travel. It refers to the internal luggage of history and memory that are transported when lives shift from one place to another" (Alexander 8). The tragic tales of blood red trains, severed limbs, lost mothers and sisters, leaving ancestral homes, and staying in rescue camps etc. shocked Meena to the core: "I realized that the past was not a mere sentimental journey for my parents, like the song told its English listeners. It was a murky bottomless pool full of monsters. . ." (75), and along with it came the realization that "None of these stories appeared in any book or newspaper or programme, and yet they were all true" (166).

She felt excluded from a past which she could not relate to. Meanwhile, it was also difficult to assimilate herself completely with the white Tollington folks for her obvious different background. She is expected by her parents to act like typical Indian girls, while she is supposed to be like any white English girl if she was to be accepted by the other children of the community, and it was a difficult position for her: "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, but living in the grey area. . ." (150). Meena was actually embarrassed of being an Indian as she felt tortured in her classes on 'India' with the textbooks painting a stereotypical picture of uncultured, uneducated, and savage Indians being lorded over by the strong and cultured British— "where erect Victorian soldiers posed in grainy photographs, their feet astride flattened tigers, whilst men who looked like any one of my uncles, remained in the background holding trays or bending under the weight of impossible bundles. . . photographs of teeming unruly mobs, howling like animals for the blood of the brave besieged British. . ." (211). It was only when her grandmother arrives and fills her with magical stories of India that she gains confidence about her connection to India, and no longer feels ashamed about her heritage. At this point she is trying "to find out who she is and where she actually belongs culturally by trying out both parts of her heritage— that of her family of origin and that of her

country in which she grows up” (Bubikova 174). As Pramod K. Nayar states: “The immigrant occupies multiple places and identities” (180); Meena finally reclaims her identity knowing what she stood for: “I now knew I was not a bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or place. The place in which I belonged was wherever I stood and there was nothing stopping me simply moving forward and claiming each resting place as home” (Syal 303).

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