



# Hyphenated Existence of British Asians in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*

A. Bercina Fernando (Reg. No. 20212214012004)  
Research Scholar, Department of English,  
St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi,  
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.)

Dr. F. Mary Priya\*  
Assistant Professor of English,  
St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi,  
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.)  
\* Email id: fmarypriya@gmail.com

## Abstract:

Multiple roles and identities, including those related to family, territory, class, religion, ethnicity, and gender, make up the self. Therefore, identity is viewed as a crucial factor in determining an individual's personality. Meena Kumar, the protagonist of Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), is also searching for her true identity. Meena, a second generation immigrant, finds ethnic identity perplexing because it is more closely linked to ancestry than to geography. Familial ties, friendship, relationships, life choices and interactions with people around us are some of the factors that contribute to the formation of an individual's identity. These myriad influences shape an individual's identity as they grow up. Finding a real and completely fitting identity seems to be a difficult task because identity construction is a never ending process. This paper is an attempt to analyse how identity is dynamic and continuously alters itself in the course of a life's journey as a result of experiences.

**Keywords:** British Asian, Cultural Identity, Ethnicity, Family, Racism.

**DOI Number:** 10.48047/nq.2022.20.20.NQ109277

**NeuroQuantology 2022; 20(20):2863-2866**

Identity is a very complicated concept that differs from one individual to another. It cannot be generalised or viewed from a single perspective. A single person can develop more than one identity. Identity is unstable and fluid. Woodward states that "Identity is marked by similarity that is of the people like us and by difference of those who are not" (7). In Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), Meena finds it more difficult to find her identity within her community as well as among her English friends.

Her friend's place of birth contributes in certain ways to their identity. But Meena was born and raised in a different milieu. She is uncertain about her ethnic identity. She is trapped between the two entirely distinct worlds of Britain and India. She perceives that she is an outsider to both cultures. She is unable to truly live up to either one's expectations.

In Bhabha's term, the "third space" turns out to be a transitional place where several identities develop. As Bhabha notes in *The*



*Location of Culture*, Meena is seen residing in the “third” or “inbetween space” (56). Meena’s dual cultural identity has become a part of her daily life, but it is incapable of assisting her decide which to accept and what kind of life to lead. Meena says that she fluctuates between two cultures, which accounts for her feelings of alienation. She does not wish to conform to the traditional ideals that her family has set out. Since her parents are incapable of leading her, she could hardly find any role model to emulate.

Meena perceives the distinction between the customs of two cultures. Christmas, which may seem unimportant to a European, is foreign to the minority groups since they practise a different faith, which is itself tied to various rituals and practices. Syal says that, “Meena’s parents are nominally Hindu, but do not practice their religion with much conviction. As Meena bemoans, they do not have a shrine in the house. Instead, they practice an interesting mix of eastern and western theism, fusing Hinduism with Christianity...I now understand why my parents made an effort to mark Jesus’s birthday” (192).

Meena feels the intense need to adopt Western culture over Indian one, and consequently, she rejects her native culture. This makes her search for an identity much more challenging. Meena starts to outrightly reject the meal her mother prepares because it exhibits Indianness. She wishes to have fish fingers because she sees them as Western cuisine. She believes that having these foods rather than the customary Indian food will make her feel more like an English person.

Meena prefers to fit in with the white teenagers in Tollington. She is entering her adolescence. She finds playing with her Indian relatives and staying indoors with her family to be somewhat monotonous. Friendship plays an integral part in the adolescent years. Hanging out with older white peers appeals to her more. They help shape Meena’s sense of self. Meena’s encounter with Anita has had a significant influence on her life. Anita is well liked by young people in Tollington, particularly by boys of her age. Meena believes that if Anita embraced her,

the entire Tollington youth population might accept her.

Meena values her bond with Anita greatly. She hates her parents and their lineage without realising what she is doing in an effort to show Anita that their connection is genuine and lasting. She is always surprised by what Anita does. With Anita, Meena explores things that are novel and untested. She believes that Anita makes her “shed inhibitions” (138). She is willing to act as per Anita’s wishes to see that their friendship succeeds. She becomes completely dependent on Anita. Meena is unaware of the dangers of such desires. “A strong will to change and the revolutionary potential of adolescence are deployed to rebel against parents, home, and past in order to become a fully-fledged member of the peer group. This is exacerbated by the experience of displacement due to the family’s history of migration” (Assmann n.pag.).

Love is a primary factor that binds Meena’s family. She believes that this applies to other families as well. She is shocked to learn about the tensions that exist in Anita’s family. Anita’s excessive independence and personal time actually indicate her mother’s lack of interest in her. She is no longer subject to her family’s strict rules. Anita enjoys the independence that Meena longs for. Meena turns rebellious against her family’s upbringing because of her white neighbour’s ostensibly carefree and idyllic family environment. It becomes clear that Anita and Meena differ greatly from one another not only in terms of their races and ethnicities but also in terms of their respective family backgrounds.

Western communities are more interested in autonomy, whereas the conventional South Asian communities view such an attitude as selfish. They strive to uphold traditions such as maintaining relationships with extended family and supporting their relatives. Most of Meena’s friends do not allow their parents the right to engage in their educational activities and personality development, but Meena’s parents are more concerned about her. Mrs. Worrall is glad to spend time with Meena and is concerned about her academic achievement. Meena learns from Mr. Kumar that Mrs. Worrall does not have much time to



spend with her grandchildren, so she showers her love and care on Meena, who essentially resembles her granddaughter. Although Meena receives much attention and care from her family and relatives, she is more interested in spending time with Anita and her peer group.

Meena realises that she has become a stranger when her family and community members gather and begin discussing their shared history with India in their native language. She could not understand her native language. She feels hurt about being left out. This increases her sense of loneliness. Her father warns her, "You really must learn Punjabi, Meena. Look how left out you feel" (205). The Midland dialect that Meena now speaks perfectly fits the setting in which she currently lives. Her complexion and her family's way of life, however, place her in an entirely distinct setting. Her in-between position makes things much more difficult. This highlights the uncertainty of her circumstances.

Meena's entirely distinct racial and ethnic background affects her social interactions. This may be the reason why Meena finds it difficult to build trusting relationships with her friends from the working and middle classes. Ironically, despite much effort, discarding her dark coloured skin turns out to be the main challenging task for her among the Tollington kids. With her dialect and demeanor, she blends into the Tollington culture, but her skin tone is a crucial marker that she tries to ignore.

Meena's early years are distinguished by the childlike belief that Asian and British people coexist peacefully, but she soon learns that it is often her physical appearance that places her in uncomfortable situations. Despite Tollington's seeming friendliness toward Mr. Kumar's family, extremist views opposing immigration are nevertheless expressed openly. The racial slurs are not particularly targeted at Meena's family, but they are an attack against the minority group that her family represents. Although diversity is viewed more positively, the eradication of racism from society is a complicated one.

Meena does not have a clear picture of her home. Her family members always consider

India to be their native land because they are rooted in Indian soil. Meena is perplexed when her father mentions that they their visiting Nanima should return back home in India after spending some time with them. But her time with her grandmother brings about great transformations within her. Nanima makes clear to Meena the rich values of Indian culture and heritage. Meena realises that her true cultural identity can be found only among the members of her own community. She starts to associate herself with them.

Meena is no longer imprisoned in Tollington. When she contemplates leaving Tollington, she considers entering a TV competition as a way to demonstrate her writing genius. But she could not locate a single person "who wasn't white" (65) and this disappoints her. As a second generation immigrant who has successfully overcome her struggles, serves as a role model for future generations. She thus acquires experience and knowledge through her endeavours and mishaps. There aren't many public figures who are British Asians and have achieved true success to inspire Meena. She stands in for an idealised bridge connecting the British and Asian immigrants. She detects things uniquely that other members of her community are unaware of. Meena's migratory identity makes her accept all the resting place as her home. The same characteristics and distinctions that prevent her from finding her identity in British society enable her to feel secure in an alien environment. It turns out to be a priceless asset. This allows the immigrant to avoid being affected by the surrounding social upheaval. Meena eventually recognises at this moment that she is in a privileged position compared to her working-class, white peers.

#### Works Cited:

- Assmann, Corinna. *Doing Family in Second-Generation British Migration Literature*. De Gruyter, 2018. *Google Books*. [https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Doing\\_Family\\_in\\_Second\\_Generation\\_Britis/SNxwDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Doing_Family_in_Second_Generation_Britis/SNxwDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0).
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Syal, Meera. *Anita and Me*. Haper Collins, 1996.



Woodward, K. *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*. Routledge, 2004.

