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Diasporic Issues in the Works of Meera Syal

Jyoti Sharma, Ph.D. Research Scholar



Meera Syal

Courtesy: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/celebrity/meera_syal/

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Abstract

Diasporic subjectivity, a pertinent topic of discussion in contemporary literature, is inevitably marked by desire to return to the lost origin. Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed is in many ways a calamity. The study of trans-cultural literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’.

The diasporic production of cultural meanings occurs in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre and dance, but writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity.

The diasporic Indian writers of the first generation have already established their credentials by winning numerous literary awards and honours. But recently the ranks of the second generation of Indian writers in the west have swelled enormously and many among them have won international recognition.

Meera Syal, who was born in England, has successfully represented the lives of first generation as well as second generation non-resident Indians in the west in her novels *Anita and Me* and *Life Isn't all ha ha hee hee*. Meera Syal is a well-known British Indian comedian and actress with regard to diasporic, literature. Her novels resonate with the predicament of diasporic visions. The South Asian diasporic writers we are looking at often describe new problems and circumstances. Their writings draw attention to the way displacements have determined cultural exchanges between communities and shaped new identities in an increasing mobile world. They often talk about how enabling it could be for women to be in different kind of communities. There is an attempt to shed new light on issues like ethnicity, culture, space, memory through multidisciplinary representations like fiction, life writing, film, photography and fiction to film. So a couple of very good recent films that highlight the potential of exploring links between migrants and the host lands are good to talk about and to teach. One of them, which is very much concerned with diasporic issues, is *Bhaji on the Beach*. It is a British film about second-generation South Asian Women in Britain and very skillfully dramatizes these questions of identity and cultural belonging.

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Keywords: Diaspora, hybridity, identity, Syal, Culture.

Introduction

In Meera Syal, there is a discernible tendency to explore trans-cultural experience. Her characters experience conflicting desires of belonging determined by the different conditions of the cosmopolitan contact zone of cultures. But the pleasure of writing as an Asian women is the pleasure of exploding stereotypes ---- Meera Syal

Writing from All Parts of the World

Contemporary South Asian Women writers write from almost anywhere in the world; from all parts of Asia, from Africa, Australia, Canada, Europe, and USA. Many of these women writers choose to focus their writings on their experiences of life as South Asian Women. It is perhaps not surprising to find that the literature of diaspora writers differs in style and content from the works of those writing from within South Asia. As there is a pattern of difference, this gives rise to the presumption that the geographical locations of the authors influence, to no small degree, their approach to writing in English, the audience for whom they write and the concerns towards which they choose to draw attention.

Two Temporalities and Two Spaces

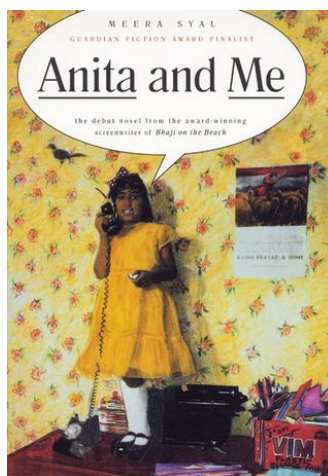
The diasporic author constantly draws upon two temporalities and two spaces. Exchanging one tradition for another, one culture for another and one home for another, the writer creates and inscribes 'alternative worlds', which, vibrant and demanding, resist the prospect of annihilation. A diasporic writer has no other worlds to live in but the ones she creates. She writes with the memories of the imported, a blend of the old and the new, of the real and the ideal.

Anita and Me

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Meera Syal's first novel features a protagonist called Meena, for whom home is Tollington, England. *Anita and Me* depicts Meena growing up and learning early to juggle two identities one for home and family life, and one for public life amongst her English peers. Meena Clearly enjoys her cosy family life, but she also strives to be regarded as a 'Tollington Wench'. She enjoys the company of her parents' friends - the diasporic South Asian Community in Britain, the 'aunties and uncles' – but she also hankers after the company of Anita Rutter, a brazen, hard-boiled English Girl.

Two Sets of Morals

Although deeply attached to her parents, Meena learns from childhood that she has two sets of morals to juggle and contend with, one applicable at home and the other applicable outside her home. Meena is well aware that stealing would horrify her parents, and yet she does steal, because it affords her a pleasing sense of bravado, and it is the passport to acceptance amongst her peers. Meena is impressed by her parents and the way they live their culture, but it is their culture, rather than hers. She is aware that the standards and practices of her parents' culture would earn her little by way of street credit, and accordingly, she learns to deal in a different moral currency, just as she learns to speak with a different accent and slang when outside her house. Although just a child, Meera perceives that life inside the home and life outside it are divided into two separate worlds.

Feeling Different

Syal shows that even a child as young as Meena although identifying with her parents' culture to some extent, already understands that she is different. She notes that although her parents are respected and approved of by the general community they live amongst, they do not completely respect or approve of their neighbours. They choose not to belong and set themselves apart from the English Community. Meena, in comparison, is comfortable thinking of herself not only as English, but as belonging to Tollington, '..... I had won them over with my cheeky charm and my deliberately exaggerated Tollington accent, thus proving I was very much one of them, they did not need to shout to make themselves understood or think they could get away with muttered swearing and I would not understand, that I belonged' (Syal, 1997). She enjoys her easy inclusion in the Tollington community and it is not until she is a little older that she would realize the underlying racial tensions and realise too, that she does not, in fact; belong. This indicates that for diasporic South Asians, wherever they go, whether in South Asia or in their new homes in the west, they continue to experience the sense of double-consciousness.

Dilemma: Divided Loyalties

Meena's dilemma is the dilemma of British-born Asians whose divided identities make it difficult for them to locate and place themselves. They do not know when, where and how to relate and belong. There is nothing 'fixed' or 'pre-given' in identity. As *Brah* puts it, "It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually, and collectively (*Brah 183*). The 'Stable Core' of the self is no more stable today. Identities, like the shifting kaleidoscopic images, are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed regularly. They are always in the process of construction. As *Hall* puts it: ... *Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply, constructed across different often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation* (Hall 4). *Anita and Me* records the struggle of Meena in such a 'fantasmatic field' to evolve an authentic self and come to terms with it. As an offspring of the family that has experienced migrancy, it is natural for Meena to inherit the

disaporic predicament of her parents. As *Uma Parameswaran* puts it very aptly, “*People who move away from their native countries not only occupy but also bequeath to subsequent generations a liminality, an uneasy pull between two cultures*” (Parameswaran 2000). Obviously the conceptualization of the native place is not easy for Meena who has never been to the homeland of her parents. The longing to belong to the place of origin is dormant at this stage and does not manifest in her as it does in the case of her parents. In addition to this the identity is yet in the process of evolving itself. The immediate battleground where it has to prove its authenticity is provided by the other culture. It is this culture of location that throws challenges to the outsider. As *Roger Bromley* puts it,

“Initially distanced from her parents and their extended family, Meena longs to identify with the local, white working class community embodied in the figure of the precocious role model, Anita” (Bromley 143).

Attempt to Erase the Culture of Origin

The stronghold of this desire not only makes the other culture fascinating, it also desires a complete erasure of the culture of her origin Bewitched by the freedom, adventure and new possibilities offered by it, Meena the outsider plunges headlong into it to become an insider. But the mere decision to be a part of any other culture does not resolve the conflicts. The plunge does not put an end to ‘the moment of transit’ in which the diasporas are caught up.

Anita and Me is a narrative about race and class. Sam and Anita never find bodies which fit them to perfection. In the final paragraph of the text Meena writes a note: ‘*Dear Anita, we are moving on Saturday. I am going to the Grammar school, so at least you won’t be around to tease me about my tam-o-shanter*’. *She never replied, of course*’ (AM 328). The active verbs in the note, ‘moving’ and ‘going’ mark off Meena from Anita who only ever existed as a ‘narrative’ supplement to, and construct of, Meena with her ‘moving’ identity. Fixed, silent, invisible, erased, Anita never could reply;; the narrative dialogue has broken down.

Understanding Departure – the Act of Migration

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The act of Migration has been described as the “quintessential experience of the twentieth century. Indeed, more people have crossed geopolitical and cultural boundaries in the last century than ever before in world history, and the global movement of peoples has resulted in the formation of a number of immigrant communities, each with its own particular characteristics. Any journey that entails physical displacement is bound to result in identity-shifts in terms of the individual’s subjectivity. The extent of transformations (social, cultural and psychological) induced by the process of migration will inevitably vary, and depend as much on the reasons for departure as on experiences post-arrival.

Migration can therefore be conceptualized as “an outcome of tensions between the individual’s desires and opportunities as a reflection of past circumstances and of expectations for the future.” The large-scale migration of a non-white labour force has become a major determinant of contemporary social experience in developed/western nations and much analysis is accordingly directed at the emergence of a ‘New World Culture’ within these geographical spaces. It is not surprising, therefore, that the primary focus of theorists within this category is on narratives that relate female subjectivity to issues of displacement and cultural syncretism, but within a specific cultural/racial paradigm.

The Other

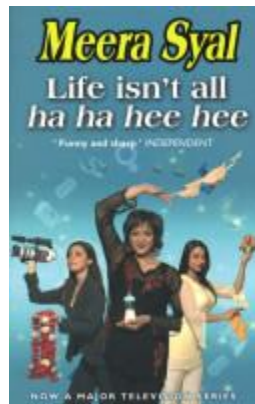
Contextualizing the racial ‘other’ becomes crucial to any understanding of the ‘self’. Concomitantly, critical responses from within diaspora discourses currently available on the migrant experiences of South Asian women focus largely on the concept of arrival as an element of “the phenomenology of contemporary migration.” As *Mary John* observes, “*the language of arrival is truly valorized.*” She explains: “*one comes across less where women have come from, much more about what they have come to*” (P.18). Critical readings of migrant narratives of South Asian women more often than not operate exclusively in terms of the discourse of displacement, dislocation and disease, within a specific cultural/racial paradigm. The critical epistemology operates on the assumption that there is an overriding anxiety and ambivalence that is characteristic of every migrant subject’s being. Indeed, many critical readings of literary narratives of migrant experiences of women suggest that migration to first-world locations is

necessarily experienced by Third-world women in terms of alienation or psychological deracination, with pathological effects on subjectivity.

Indian Diaspora meets Indo-chic.

Rejuvenation – the Puzzle

The quality of rejuvenation that may lead the mainstream to regard the Indian diasporic community in its midst with suspicion: their lack of dullness may be reason for concern or cause for celebration. Diasporic culture clashes with the dullness of ‘pure’ Britishness which, of course, may not exist in the first place. What is at stake, then, in this paradoxical politics of Indo-Chic? Is the west celebrating its own demise, its having been taken over by the ethnics, or has it successfully contained this ethnicity by decontextualizing it?



It is this puzzle that Syal’s narrative begins with, *Life Is Not All Ha Ha Hee Hee* centres on the attempt by three Indo-Anglican women – Tania, Chila and Sunita - to make sense of an increasingly multicultural Britain and a mainstream’s nostalgia for whiteness:

“Not even snowfall could make Leighton look lovely. Sootfall was what it was [...] pigeons shook their heads, sneezing, blinking away the icy specks, claws skittering on the unfamiliar roof which had once been the reassuring that flat red tiles of the Methodist church and was now a gleaming minaret, topped by a metal sickle moon. The moon at midday, dark snow and nowhere to perch. No wonder they said coo.” (LAH7-8).

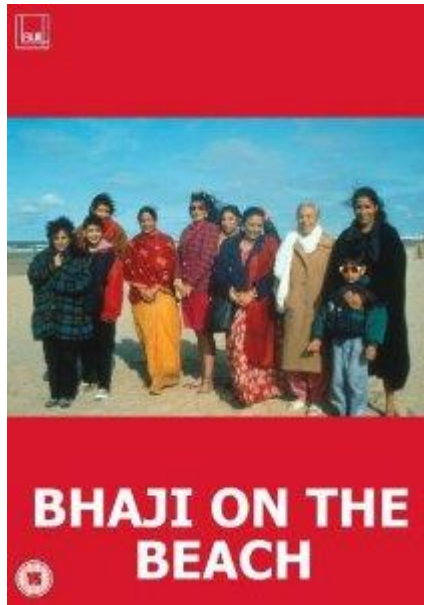
Like the pigeons, the mainstream may have nowhere left to perch in this bric-a-brac of cultural diversity. Indo-Chic, in this sense, may be the mainstream's way of turning necessity into virtue. Before the British can be displaced by the diasporic, they turn Indian themselves:

“a fine drizzle of ash [...] sprinkled the pavements and terrace rooftops, dusting the rusty railings and faded awnings of the few remaining shops along the high road. They formed a puzzling collection of plucky bric-a-brac emporiums (All the plastic matting you will ever need!) and defeated mini-marts (cigs ‘N’ Bread! Fags ‘N’ Mags!), braving the elements like the no-hoppers no-one wanted on their team.” (LAH8).

Cultural Take-over and Economic Rejuvenation

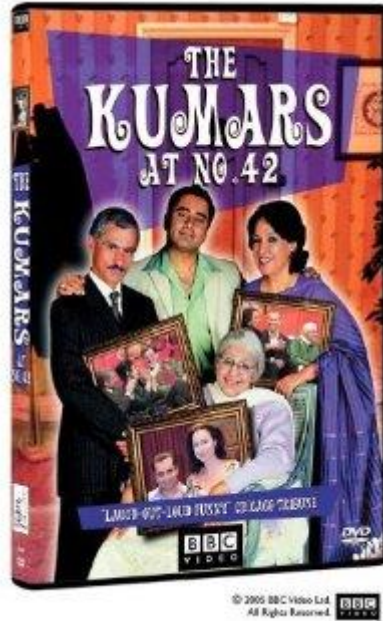
Economic rejuvenation, then, is anticipated by cultural take-over: What the now outmoded “rivers of blood” rhetoric against immigration could not have foreseen is precisely the self-imposed Indianization of British culture. For what the charge of “swamping” ethnics fails to take into account is precisely the fact that Indo-Chic is a mainstream phenomenon: The problem is not simply that Indian youth insists on listening to Bhangra, but that Bhangra has become a British form of expression. It is here, however, that Bhangra clashes with Indo-Chic even though both attest to the impossibility of authenticity: where Bhangra fuses the traditional and the contemporary, the British and the Indian diasporic, Indo-Chic believes in an authenticity which it itself helps to destroy: by importing the authentic but doing so in its decontextualized form, Indo-Chic destroys the very authenticity it covets. The allure of Indian diasporic culture, then, may be precisely its ‘infectiousness’. Yet what is striking is precisely the fact that the British mainstream in search of cultural rejuvenation does not look to the Indian diasporic communities in its midst, but to an Indianness it has fabricated itself.

Bhaji On the Beach



Meera Syal's *Bhaji on the Beach* is based almost entirely upon the differences within a small section of an Asian community based in Birmingham, rather than on the difference between the community and the dominant white society. The film is more an exploration of gender issues than those of race, but these are articulated within a number of set-pieces related to a range of codes shaped by a specific ethnicity and cultural practices. Sex, pleasure, food and family, are all subject to transcoding within the film which transfers its cast of characters from a recognizably 'Asian' enclave in Birmingham to Blackpool, the quintessentially white, working class English seaside resort, which becomes a metaphorical site for exploring the transformations of 'Asianness' brought about by the pressures of migration and inter-generational gender conflicts. All the events take place in the course of a single day which are magnified by this time-space compression. The potential changes brought about by the day and the mode of resolution make the film a comedy, but the dilemmas posed suggest levels of conflict and tension beyond the comic.

The Kumar's at No. 42



Meera Syal's sketch comedies *The Kumar's at No. 42* (2001-2006) and *Goodness Gracious Me* (1996-1998) link her directly with a sort of popular sub-genre, covering over her important screen contributions. *Bhaji on the Beach*, too, has many light-hearted, even comedic moments and this may be the reason for those wishing to engage in serious criticism to abandon it. *Bhaji*, however, is worthy of critical exploration. It says much about living in the liminal spaces of diaspora. Its humour and seriousness expose external and internal perceptions of "Indianness" specifically "female Indianness". But what makes it particularly provocative is its efforts to capture character adaptation in process. *Bhaji* is worthy of serious investigation. In *Bhaji*, the very idea that "black" represents something "other" within the South Asian Community points to instances of racism between marginalized groups. In Britain, immigration policies entrenched and perpetuated women's dependency on men, and the "pathologized" Asian family has been systematically under attack by the state. Domestic violence is an overt form of subordination for Asian women, but the family is not the only site of oppression. *Bhaji* thus challenges myopic perceptions that it is simply "culture" and "tradition" that create oppression. Meera Syal, who like Kureishi was born in Britain, has emphasized the need she felt as a child to constantly construct strategies for survival, to make up stories, even tell "lies", as a means of creating a differently mirrored space, a space which could enable the ironic possibilities of 'double-entendre' and comedy to explode prevailing stereotypes. The literary voices of the Asian

diaspora in Britain derive from a variety of different histories, and emerge from a number of diverse subject positions.

Conclusion

The writings of diasporic South Asians have greater influence over the shaping of a global South Asian image and identity. In most cases, their writings are more widespread, more easily accessible, and better promoted than those of the home writers. Diasporic or postcolonial authors writing or adapting for cinema or television express a throbbing anxiety by exposing the novelty of intercultural forces at work in British society to the Western showbiz. The focal point in Syal's novel resides in the treatment of hybridity: It is a privileged site of negotiation, a zone of in-betweenness, that regulates the experience of the diaspora, Syal argues a different interpretation of such a notion and warns about its confusing powers. Meera Syal's technique consists of elaborating on personal memories and drawing events from the media: by textualising some traits of actuality she sanctions her light-hearted, self-ironic and sincere commitment to the migrant question. The literature of diaspora which is emerging rapidly is the need of the time as it helps to develop cross-cultural understanding of culture and its effect on the mentality of Indian people, which is contradictory to western life and thinking.

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Colophon:

My grateful thanks are due to my Supervisor **Dr. S. P. Malhotra, M.A. (Economics), M. Phil. (English), Ph.D.** Head of the Department (English and Modern European Languages) Banasthali Vidyapith Tonk - 304022, Rajasthan

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