

CROSS CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN MEERA SYAL'S NOVEL *ANITA AND ME*

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Abstract: *Cross cultural sensitivity is the knowledge, consciousness, and acceptance of other cultures. The people have to learn about various kinds of people and understand others who come from a different cross 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 cross cultural sensitivity.*

The adventure in a new place, people who have had very different life experiences. It opens their mind and heart to those who may not previously have shared their unique culture and heritage. Cross cultural sensitivity doesn't mean that they must be an expert in each culture's values. It means that they are willing to understand and reveal empathy rather than judge them. It is important because a lack of cultural sensitivity is leading to exhibit their intolerance.

Cross cultural sensitivity implies that both groups of people understand and respect each other's characters. It is a challenging one as an employee or emigrants to adopt the dominant culture or not. People show respect for other cultures, languages and traditions. They are sensitive to other's feelings regarding their homeland.

This paper entitles as "Cross 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.

Key Words: *Cross Culture, Race, Discrimination, Multiculturalism.*

The world is become a global village. Every nation is like an island. Formerly, people do not require to communicate with people of other cultures like now a day. They travel from their own countries to other countries for their employment, business, tourism, etc. They need to communicate with people from various cultures. So they have to be conscious of the fact that cultures differ in numerous ways. It is considered to be acceptable and respectful in one culture and it may not be extensive in another culture.

Literature represents the aspects of the culture and its origin. It can be used as a rich source to develop an ability to communicate appropriately in alien cultural backgrounds. Culture is like gravity. People do not experience it if they leap into the air. It surprises them out of their self-satisfaction when they are uprooted from their own environment and planted into another, either temporarily or permanently. It ascribes to them from womb to tomb. Though they can adjust themselves into their adopted culture to some extent, their own culture stays with them permanently. It follows them like their own shadows.

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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 own culture is not better than any other culture. It can take time to build a high level of cross cultural sensitivity.

This paper entitles as "Cross Cultural Sensitivity in Meera Syal's Novel *Anita and Me*". It reveals the cross cultural sensitivity of emigrant characters like the first generation mother Daljit and the second generation daughter Meena in Meera Syal's debut novel *Anita and Me* (1997).

Meera Syal is a British novelist of many talents. Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* explores the mysteries 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 paradoxes 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 to be strange and alien to the immigrants. Meena's parents move to Britain because of the 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 have come from Punjab to England. Meena’s mother Daljit as she has 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 have appeared complete at the moment.

Cross cultural sensitivity is appeared in the character Daljit. She has suffered 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 has tried to manage 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 has accepted and adopted herself to the new culture.

The mass settlement in Tollington gives rise to cross cultural sensitivity. The garden in front of Meena’s house was different when compares to other gardens. As a child growing in the immigrant land Meena has observed that their garden is “odd one out in the village” (15) because her mother has grown mint, thunia, coriander and lemon verbena etc to garnish their Indian meals. Daljit has explained to Meena “this one thunia... coriander I mean... this lemon verbena, you can make tea from this...” (16). She has felt that their lifestyle is odd from the rest of the residents. Meena dislikes those herbal plants in her garden. She longs to grow roses and sunflowers.

Cross cultural sensitivity has acquired in Meena’s character too, “we were the only Indian that had ever lived in Tollington” (22) and the country, England looked green. Kumar is worked in Tollington with the English people. Daljit has been working as an infants’ teacher in the adjoining school. She wears sari because she doesn’t change her traditional dressings and food habits. She has been living in the migrant land peacefully. They have sensitive feeling 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 have interacted with each other, eaten food and watched television together. It is Meena’s parents who have dressed in the most impressive way.

Meena’s Aunties have perceived that cross cultural sensitivity. It has emerged when the English people have treated their own children as inhuman. They have 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 have made a journey from the civilized side of Wolverhampton. They have complained to Meena that the immigrant land is not good when compare to India.

Anita Rutter’s mom, Deirdre, has eloped with a butcher. She has left a note. She has not care about her children. Anita seems dead upset and cries. Meena’s interjected mama has been looking after Anita and Tracey. English culture is exactly different from Indian culture. The English does not care about their children. They easily have left their children without having any affection. But Indians are not like that.

In their village, Sandy, a divorcee, has spoken with Daljit and he praised 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 have learnt to respect 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 reflect on their past life. It 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 have been living far away. So she has talked to Daljit and they have shared their past suffering. Cross culture sensitivity acquires when Meena hears their speech. It has 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 died because of Cancer. Then, after three weeks, Mr. Christmas also has died in his sleep.

Daljit has attended the funeral. She agonizes “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 has worn grey to the funeral. She has a hesitation in herself, because cross cultural sensitivity emerges to Daljit. She never knows about the emigrated mourning culture.

Meena hasn’t 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 have made 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 notice her. They have noticed only Anita. So she is in need of solution.

Every Thursday Jackie magazine delivered the 'Cathy and Claire' column which always helps her. It is a revelation and relief to her. But no other readers share her dilemma. She is culturally sensitive towards the incident and so she begins to write about her own feelings in the magazine. So she has decided 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 is "always smile, a guy does not want to waste his time with a miserable face ... BE YOURSELF!" (146). Her parents never teach her about the emigrated culture. So she has a hesitation to speak or mingle with the whites.

After that she has sung 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 can't 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 has seen the sky through the window and expressed her doubt: "It's the same sky... The same sky in India. It's hard to believe, isn't it?" She was missing India very much and so she has seen the stars and related 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). Critic Iqbal S. Sekhon says that the Punjabis have their own interesting myths to tell about the stars after death and occupy a high place in the sky.

Cross cultural sensitivity of racism emerges through the act of Anita's mother. Deirdre is the mother of Anita and Tracey, who 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 has 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 asks Kumar sensitively to tell the difference between Indian and 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, the mother of Daljit, has 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 rushed into the garden shouting and waving. Shalia has 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 with them, wherever they have gone.

Meena's parents are ready to leave Tollington village and have to go 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 confident about 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 adolescence 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 became 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).

Cross cultural sensitivity has happened in migrated people. The migrated adults have carried the past memories and histories. But like Meena who has been born there to create them to explore other spaces. Migrated generation has worried about their future generation.

Thus *Anita and Me* novel is about the compelling truth of Cross cultural sensitivity. It implies that both groups of people understand and respect each other's characters. It is a challenging one as an employee or emigrants to adopt the dominant culture or not. People show respect for other cultures, languages and traditions. They are sensitive to other's feelings regarding their homeland.

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