



IN SEARCH OF REAL SELF: CULTURAL ALIENATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *WIFE* AND MEERA SYAL'S *ANITA AND ME*

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ABSTRACT

Diaspora literature is often considered a product of the privileged immigrants having the advantages of education and literacy. This kind of literature is tinged with different types of diasporic feelings that the first and second generation of diaspora writers explore. The literature has as its central focus discrimination, nostalgia, identity crisis and a sense of cultural alienation. In general, this type of literature draws our attention towards the isolation of the immigrants in the new land, the problems of discrimination and assimilation in the new society and their in-betweenness. This paper focuses on the portrayal of cultural alienation and identity formation of the protagonists in two fictional works, Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*. The main characters of these novels from Indian diaspora literature are young Indian women who are generally considered to be good instances for studying diaspora and identity-related issues as they represent several aspects associated with gender discrimination and ethnic identities. The protagonists of these novels, in fact, reveal multi-faceted nature of the two terms, cultural alienation and identity formation among the immigrants.

Keywords: *Indian Diaspora, Cultural Alienation, Identity Formation, Multiculturalism, First Generation Writers, Second Generation Writers.*

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The concept of diaspora faithfully captures the essence of the term migration as well as various types of displacement and different kinds of socio-cultural and psychological experiences associated with them. In the host land, the members of a diaspora community often find themselves in minority positions and are torn between the two cultures. Diaspora works skilfully portray all those facets of diaspora experiences. In fact, diaspora literature often places its characters in a “third place” or between the two cultures and female immigrant writers find them even in a narrower place for a woman in a diaspora community is frequently regarded as a minority within a minority. From the perspective of diaspora studies, woman writers constitute a very significant part of diaspora literature as they cast valuable insights into day-to-day activities like household works, pastimes and several forms of identity construction by the ethnic as well as gendered minorities in a broader society. In fact, the female writers of Indian diaspora easily outnumber their male counterparts. These diaspora writers may also be grouped on account of their generations or ages. The first generation of diaspora writers, i.e., writers who are born in one country and later move to another country for several reasons, by and far prefer their home country as well as their settled country as the settings of their works. On the other hand, the second generation diaspora writers, i.e., writers who are born and brought up in the settled country of their parents, generally consider the land of their birth as their homeland. They often express their vexation at the nostalgic feelings of their parents. Nonetheless, two common themes found in the works of both generations of writers are the themes of cultural alienation and identity formation of the immigrants. *Cultural alienation* is defined as “the feeling or experience of being pulled towards but not fully accepted into either or both one’s Asian ethnic cultural group and the American cultural group. It is a potential consequence of being an ethnic and racial minority who is culturally competent in two cultures with often opposing values.” (Kwong). While the process of identity formation consists of “a process of constant reevaluation of what group membership means as immigrants collectively forge new social relations and

identity in the place of settlement” (Brighton). In the host society, diaspora communities continuously confront with challenges regarding their so-far held beliefs and values and that, on the one hand, influence strongly the nature and level of individual and collective integration, and on the other, force the immigrants to re-evaluate their social and cultural identities which impact on identity formation. The individuals in a diaspora community both of the first generation and second generation “develop their personal identity as they confront conflicting ethnic, personal and national identity options. They face with both host and origin social constructs, contradicting expectations, traditions and norms during the process of individual identity formation” (Zubida et al). Thus, three types of identities, such as homeland identity, settled land identity and hyphenated identity can be traced among the immigrants. To explore culture alienation and identity formation in the works of Indian diaspora writers, this paper takes two novels, *Wife* and *Anita and Me*, written by Bharati Mukherjee and Meera Syal respectively. This researcher personally feels that these two works fit best for the purpose as these two are written by two female authors from both the first and second generation with a woman protagonist at the centre of each novel. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni once comments that the female writers articulate more clearly in their books “the deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and here (abroad) --- and show them emerge... as stronger and self-reliant women” (Kamath 1999). These two novels masterfully delineate cultural alienation and identity formation of the first and second generation female immigrants though in varying degrees.

BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S WIFE

Among the prominent figures of the women writers of the Indian diaspora, Bharati Mukherjee (1940-), as a first generation Indian diaspora, at first settled in Canada and later moved to America. Bharati Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* (1975) narrates the complexity of cultural alienation and loss of identity of the first generation immigrants through the experiences of a young Bengali wife. The novel is highly critical of the late 20th-century Indian middle class. Mukherjee in this novel explores the



complex relationship between the societal and economic powers and how they exert their influences in the Indian diaspora community. The main character of the novel, a young Indian woman Dimple, is a product of the post-1960 migratory movement. The novel is remarkable for its skilful delineation of the life of its female protagonist exiled from her own country as well as her own community.

Set in the 1970's, the novel depicts the deliberate "exile" of urban well-educated Indians to New York in search of better prospects and career and for economic stability. The lives of Indian immigrant women, as depicted in the novel, are marked by a primary paradox. The married women in a diaspora society enjoy greater private spaces in a foreign land than in their homeland, India. But, side by side, in their migratory lives, their personal lives often overlap with their social lives in diaspora society as there is always a demand from the small diaspora community for cultural cohesion and social integration. This paradoxical nature of public and private life for a married woman in a diaspora society has been given prominence from the beginning of the novel.

The novel, divided into three parts, has three prime settings. The first part of the plot takes place in Calcutta, the second in America when Amit and Dimple are living with Sens and the third part takes place when the couple is subletting an apartment in Manhattan. The beginning of the novel unfolds Dimple Dasgupta's father busy at scanning matrimonial advertisements in search of a suitable bridegroom of appropriate caste for Dimple. To Dimple, however, this marriage is a chance to achieve her personal freedom and opportunities so far unattainable to her as to most other woman raised in Indian culture. Dimple has long been waiting for this since, as she hopes, this marriage will be a gateway to her identity formation.

Eventually, Dimple is married to one Amit Kumar Basu. However, her hopes and dreams of her post-marriage freedom do not materialise. Her expectation to gain an identity of her own gradually diminishes beginning with her mother-in-law's taking away her maiden name and preferring instead calling her Nandini. In the house of Dimple's mother-in-law, the newly married couple lead a life which is far away

from Dimple's dream life full of glamour. Again, Dimple's husband Amit turns out to be a less romantic person expecting Dimple to act mechanically only with the aim to please him.

However, with their immigration to America, the major identity crisis for Dimple begins to take place as she gradually discovers herself more alienated in an almost unfamiliar country. Just after her immigration, Dimple's expectation of possessing her own identity and re-discovering her own self begins afresh as the very name "America" brings to her mind the concept of freedom. But again her dreams of identity formation shatter as instead of adapting herself in the real America, she takes recourse in the 'reel' America. Her husband Amit expects her to be communicative with other people in the country but is also cautious against the effects of American cultures on Dimple. Consequently, Dimple begins to hide her desires from her husband and takes shelter to her world of fantasies. All these gradually exert adverse effects on Dimple's mental health and destroy her sensibility. She further begins to evaluate and compare the Indians around her. Meena Sen seems to her the ideal Indian woman who is born to become satisfied with her position and identity in the society and in the family as a wife and mother rather than having an identity of her own. Ina Mullick, an emboldened pant-wearing woman is the representative of just the opposite extreme, the embodiment of the free and unshackled womanhood. However, Dimple finds herself like none of them. In fact, in the beginning of Dimple's immigrant life in America, the protagonist feels the urge to recreate her own identity as a member of the small Indian immigrant community in New York. Nonetheless, as the days pass, instead of freedom that the concept of 'America' brings to her mind earlier, her life is gradually confined to the private and daily activities of domestic life in the alien and foreign land of America. But Dimple lacks the firmness of mind to go out to the outer world and build her own identity. Instead, her identity formation takes place in her fantasies and her struggle for adaptation becomes symbolic, not a real one. Consequently, she begins to consider Amit as her adversary when he fails to act according to her fantasies. "Her continuous dream about her having



been murdered is rebirthing of a new sensual Dimple who craves attention” (Singh 2010). The situation worsens when Dimple faces trouble in the foreign land to control her own ‘self’, her natural instincts and her dreams as well as expectations from her marriage as in American society, she finds none to share her mental agony. Ultimately, being unable to cope with her present situation, she almost loses her mental stability and stabs Amit seven times in the hope of getting her much-expected freedom. Thus, Mukherjee depicts her protagonist as the “other”, exiled, unassimilated and is also unable to fully accept her identity of a Bengali housewife. In the novel, she is drawn as a character who lacks the firmness to mould her own destiny. She remains in her own fantasies and gets more isolated and depressed.

Mukherjee’s characters, particularly of the first generation, often show signs of alienation from the society and culture of the host land, even though they never hesitate to receive benefits financially from the country. In a very similar line, Dimple in *Wife* hardly interacts with the Americans of her neighbourhood as, according to her perception, they are nothing but the symbols of violence, consumerism, and sensual pleasure. With the exceptions of a few young Americans, almost all Americans remain to her the inhabitants of a distant land just like the Indian film stars of her early days in Calcutta. Thus, her desire to form her self-identity within and outside the diaspora community is severely threatened and her mental, as well as psychological alienation from the outside world, embarks her in a third place between the diaspora community and the American society. As a first generation immigrant, Dimple fails utterly to form her self-identity in the diaspora society as well as in extremely flexible American society. The fact that other Indian housewives lead their lives with apparent ease in the same manner and convention as in India further exasperates her. She is severely critical of the other extreme also where to correspond with the foods and clothing of American manner is a way to recreate one’s self-identity:

“I’m sorry,” Dimple whispered. “There are some things I can’t do. Wearing pants is one of them [. . .] I just don’t want to start all this. If I wear pants

to eat pizza in the winter, who knows what I’ll be wearing to eat at the Dairy Queen next summer.” (*Wife* 155)

However, in her life of cultural and social alienation both from her ethnic group and the American society, Dimple surprisingly shows feelings of affinity and psychological as well as emotional attachment with a man of American origin, Milt Glasser- the “exotic other”. In fact, this uneven affair marks her strong desire to escape from the conventions and formalities of a traditional Indian society. The affair that defies all social, cultural and familial norms naturally comes to an end shortly. However, it seems that it is only in this short period that Dimple betrays some signs of self-affirmation and somewhat shows a balance between the identity of a Hindu woman within the social structure of a Hindu community and the life of a free woman in a more liberal American society. “Milt shows appreciation towards Dimple’s domestic skills without presuming that they define her whole female identity and encourages her tentative curiosity about life outside her own experience without forcing her to relinquish her accustomed self-image” (Valjento 2004). Dimple cannot sustain her individual self to the rest of her life in America is due to the fact that she enjoys little freedom in the hands of her husband who let her act freely according to her own whims. Thus, unable to form her self-identity, Dimple finally becomes a psychopath and even proceeds to kill her own husband in order to preserve her own identity.

Thus, the novel delineates the protagonist’s social, cultural and psychological alienation from both the “host” society and the diaspora society. This isolation and her futile attempts of identity formation embark her in a no man’s land, between the bygone past and yet-to-come future. In fact, in this context in the line of Said (1984), it may be deduced that Dimple’s social and psychological isolation is ultimately suggestive of the right of an individual to refuse to change her personal as well as social identity necessary to adapt oneself in a diaspora society.

MEERA SYAL’S ANITA AND ME

The second author of this study, Meera Syal (1961-) is a well-known British Indian comedian and actress. As a second generation diasporic writer of



Indian origin, she has skillfully portrayed in her novels the lives and plights of both first generation and second generation immigrants. Personally, she is a second generation South Asian diasporic writer of Punjabi origin, who is born and brought up in Britain. However, unlike her fellow writers, her novels are mostly preoccupied with the feelings and perceptions of adolescent girls and young adult women. In her fictional world, the women characters confront the problem of balancing the cultures of the homeland and the host land. In fact, in her novels, the characters, mainly the second generationers, show lots of energy at the beginning. Their parents who are first generation immigrants remain nostalgic about their past lives. But the second generation of characters begins to interact with the English society in their own ways. However, for those characters, there is no home country. For them, the concept of home is a nonentity as they have no place to call their own. India to them is just the land of their ancestors and as such they never feel the same nostalgic feeling for India as that of their parents.

The novel of our discussion, *Anita and Me* (1996) which is Meera Syal's debut novel has as its setting a fictional Midlands' mining area in Tollington in 70's. The novel which has some similarities with the author's life depicts the cravings and aspirations of a Punjabi girl to gain a British identity. The protagonist Meena who is still in her adolescent befriends Anita, a British working girl who to Meena is the embodiment of white British culture. Meena hopes that her bonding with Anita would relief her from her inferior Asian stigma and raise her status above the level of common Asian girls. However, her parents, like any other first-generation immigrants, make continuous efforts to bring her back to their "desi" Punjabi culture and consequently disapprove their bond of friendship. "Anita was a bad influence, that was official ... Anita and I were now officially mates" (*Anita* 135).

In the novel, the two characters are complimentary in nature. They are the representatives of the two opposite traits. While Meena's parents expect her to be a traditional Hindu girl, meek and submissive in nature, Anita betrays the characteristics of an outright and straightforward girl with little consideration for the customs or

traditional roles of a girl in the society. However, Meena keeps secret admiration for Anita. "Anita gave voice to all wicked things I had often thought but kept zipped up inside my good girl's winter coat".

Unfortunately, within a few days, Meena experiences the bitter tastes of racism inherent in British society. This experience and her exposure to her indigenous culture in her Nanima arrived from India draw her closer to her own Punjabi culture. Gradually she breaks out from her obsession with white culture. In fact, the novel shows a deep desire of the protagonist for her 'real' home in India though this home is to her, as to the most other second generation immigrants including the author, more mythological than real in nature. To the protagonists in Syal's novels (Meena in *Anita and Me* or Chila, Tania and Sunita in *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*), the mythological 'homeland' flashes on their minds not as their nostalgic root, nor do they show yearnings to go back there. In fact, they look back to their ancestral homeland to claim an ethnic identity, a platform for their reconstructed self. In those second generationers, the indigenous culture and the culture of the foreign land, both are engaged in playing complex roles in forming their identities. Meena understands: "I've always been a sucker for a good double entendre; the gap between what is said and what is thought, what is stated and what is implied, is a place in which I have always found myself. I'm really not a liar; I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong" (*Anita* 10). Thus, though in the beginning, Meena has the strong yearning to merge with the white culture, she ultimately takes recourse to the lap of traditionality to form her own identity. Caroline Marshall makes a valuable observation regarding this:

Meena is very proud of her Indian roots and culture and was aware of her racial difference from an early age. At school, however, Meena was not a victim of racism, but was picked on because she was 'mouthy'. "I'd grown up with the lads in the yard, I'd hit anyone if they called me names... we were all at the bottom of the social pile. We had that in common." Back at home, she lived in a 'little India' – a world preserved by her parents and an extended family of 'aunties' and 'uncles' who weren't blood



relatives but connected by something deeper, India. As a child, she always felt part of her this thing called family, and this place called India (Marshall 2009).

In fact, a close examination of Syal's protagonists reveals that in spite of being second generation immigrants, ultimately they act in consonant with their traditional norms. Those female characters, including Meena, at first show desires to adopt the Western ideal, but repeated troubles and turmoil, both from internal and external agencies, ultimately bring them back to the shelter of traditional culture and ethos. In *Anita and Me*, Meena also at first does not like to be regarded as a stereotyped adolescent girl of Indian Diaspora community. However, her cravings to be recognised as a reformed 'other', equivalent of a British girl dissociate her first from the Western community and then from her own Indian community. Thus, in this state, Meena somewhat resembles Dimple. However, at the end, Meena, unlike Dimple, returns to the shelter of her indigenous culture. In her longing for a mythical homeland, she, like Chila in *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, betrays her desire for a second home.

In fact, in Syal's novels, the second generation protagonists turn to several communities in search of their group identities. They seek to find their social identities among the Westerners around them, return to their native communities in search of their true identities or even hunt for solidarity with their inmates. To have the feeling of a well-knit society, the casual get-together shutting the front door proves to them to be particularly helpful. As Meena states:

...if the very act of shutting our front door transported us onto another planet, where non-related elders were called Aunties and Uncles and talked in rapid Punjabi, ...where we ate food with our fingers and discussed family feuds happening five thousand miles away, where manners were so courtly that a raised eyebrow could imply an insult, where sensibilities were so finely tuned that an advert featuring a woman in a bikini could clear a room (*Anita* 165).

However, it is not only the British society that shows its snobbishness towards the immigrants. The attitude is reciprocal too. That the Indians too harbour within them the same derogatory attitudes

towards the British culture is prominent in the following lines uttered by Meena's mother:

I will never understand this about the English, all this puffing up about being civilized with their cucumber sandwiches and cradle of democracy big talk, and then they turn round and kick their elders in the backside, all this It's My Life, I Want My Space stupidity, You Can't Tell Me What To Do cheekiness, I Have To Go Bingo selfishness and You Kids Eat Crisps Instead Of Hot Food nonsense. What is this My Life business, anyway? We all have obligations, no one is born on their own, are they? (*Anita* 58-9).

At the end, Meena is also ready to accept her culture and customs unhesitatingly thus sacrificing her individual self:

"I would grow my hair long and vaguely feminine, I would be nice to Pinky and Baby and seek out their company willingly, I would write letters to India and introduce myself properly to that anonymous army of blood relatives, I would learn to knit, probably, and I would always tell the truth" (*Anita* 284).

The novel ends with an optimistic tone. The small mining area in Tollington is going to be incorporated within a global context much wider in scope. Thus, the feuds between the two cultures and the narrow geographical and cultural boundaries seem to be dissolved in a wider multicultural perspective. Meena also finds Harrinder and Mireille and it appears that this episode has ultimately closed out her search for her own identity. "Meena resists both the self-(de)formative stereotypes of traditional Indianness and the alienating influence of English *Bildung*...Meena has learnt to locate and identify herself by concentrating on 'what [rather than where] the heart is'" (Schoene-Harwood).

Thus, from the above discussion, it is evident that the two writers express the diasporic feelings and the quest for identity in their unique manners and a critical and sensitive mind will certainly find that each writing differs in its own way. In Bharati Mukherjee's novel the protagonist who is a first generation immigrant is confused between two cultures and struggles hard to adapt herself to the new land but is finally unable to strike the balance between the two cultures and ultimately loses her



mental stability. However, as a second generation diaspora writers, Meera Syal focus more on multiculturalism and confused identities in *Anita and Me*. As a second generation immigrant, Syal is directly exposed to Western culture and consequently raises direct questions about her traditional ideas, values and culture. The protagonist in *Anita and Me* can neither reject the Indian culture nor even fully accept the Western values. This comes out to be an ongoing, draining and difficult process for her. Like Gogol (in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*) Meena's quest for identity seems to be a never-ending search. While *Wife* narrates the life history of a first generation diaspora character who suffers from the mental instability due to her sense of insecurity and lack of own identity in American society, in *Anita and Me* the protagonist is consciously situated in a multicultural setting combining elements of diverse culture in one's life and negotiating one's identity that is no longer fixed but shifting and multifaceted. In fact, as the generation changes, the diaspora writers show a shift in their themes and motifs from discrimination and alienation to identity formation. It may be safely concluded that while Bharati Mukherjee concentrates on the awful nature of the identities of survival in an apparently hostile society, Meera Syal, with the change of generation, tends to conceptualise and celebrate acculturation and assimilation of the two different cultures. This shift is clearly discernible in the works of these two diaspora writers discussed in this study.

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