



# Identity Beyond The Self: Group Existence Among The Diasporic Women Characters In The Novels Of Meera Syal

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**Abstract:** The South Asian diasporic author, Meera Syal creates a unique portrayal of the women characters in her novels where the protagonists invariably women have acculturated and have carved a niche in their hostland. However the homeland remains an important subject not only for discussion but also for their existence. The cultural ties with the members of the community and people of the homeland observing the same rituals or believing in similar sentiments bring people together, which is evinced in the lives of the women protagonists in the diaspora. The characters of Meera Syal, mostly women come together in combating the attacks faced by the South Asian community in Britain and they resort to their community-existence or their sisterhood as their strength in their Asian Britishness.

**Index Terms:** Identity, Diaspora, emancipation, acculturation, homeland, hostland

The women characters in the novels of most South Asian diasporic women writers have altogether a different story and a seriously different approach as they enter into diaspora. Their story of loss and lack has a difference as the women get together in search of their space and identity. Far from considering themselves as outsiders, they often come close to their hostland in regard and admiration. There are times when genuine sympathy for the West is also traced. However the characters, mostly women become one in camaraderie and friendship with other women who are all diasporic. They get beyond their personal selves and form a group identity that gives them the power to combat and survive in their new home and diverse cultures. The paper intricately studies the subtle ties between women that gives the women characters their strength and survival skills for which they possibly become better survivors in the diaspora compared to the men in several cases. The relationship between the women characters in the fiction of South Asian diasporic author Meera Syal is taken for study.

The first generation characters who have had first hand knowledge of their homelands either like Nazneen in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* or Shyama in Meera Syal's *The House of Hidden Mothers* have a different notion of their nation than second generation characters like Meena, a girl in her early teens in Syal's *Anita and Me* or Chila, Tania and Sunita in her (Syal's) *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, who fail to develop an emotional connection with their homeland as they had never been to their land of origin. Still everywhere is a dire attempt by the diasporic subjects to connect to the homeland and its cultural ties while cherishing a position in the hostland. As the artist Nisma Zaman writes about herself and her sister:

As children of a mixed heritage raised in the US (our mother is American with ancestry from Great Britain, and our father is from Bangladesh, with Middle Eastern ancestry), we can pass for a number of cultures (Zaman 260).

Far from the grim effects of patriarchy or the acerbic attacks of racism, South Asian diasporic women find a home for themselves in the hostland amidst homeland-culture. A powerful identity, floating amidst numerous lapses as well as possibilities, creating its own stance and making a world which is mid-way through between the cultural tradition of homeland and the liberty of dress and money, workplace and a liberated setting of the hostland. Women grow strong in their emancipation; however the emancipation comes as an identity tag which is not for one but in most cases a group identity. A similar oneness and growing structure of power through this coming together is observed in the novels in texts by Indian writers as well, like *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande or *The Space Between Us* by Thrity Umrigar, and so on, though in a different ambience. As the critic Geetanjali Singh Chanda observes:

*That Long Silence* and *The Space Between Us* explore community formation and the transformation of a specific all gendered female space into a “womenspace” that began in the enforced segregation of the zenana in the haveli but is carried over into the apartment metaphorically if not spatially (Chanda 119)

Meera Syal, an actor, screenplay writer and novelist finds Asian notion of womanhood as quite an interesting topic for discussion. While the women choose to exist in the West, there is nonetheless nostalgia and bit of awkwardness, fear and clash of loyalty and overall, a fear that they would forever be in a world which is averse to their sensibility. As Syal mentions in her debut novel that there would be a part of her heart, as, her papa’s song made her feel that, “...there was a corner of me that would be forever not England” (*Anita* 112).

The South Asian British diasporic writer of Indian origin, Syal, flaunts her second generation identity. While the author maintains a camaraderie and oneness with the country of her stay, she continues to express her feelings; she creates solidarity with people of her community, and as Meena mentions:

I rarely rebelled openly against this communal policing, firstly because it somehow made me feel safe and wanted, and secondly, because I knew how intensely my parents valued these people they so readily renamed as family, faced with the loss of their own blood relations (*Anita* 31).

These relationships with the homeland and hostland, where the protagonists of Meera Syal’s novel create an ambience which is of the West, but a solidarity found among people of her homeland, is very important. The characters that Meera Syal creates, mostly women do not wish to return to the homeland. They had never been to India in most of the cases, except for Shyama in *The House*, who is a first generation diasporic and has to go to India as her parents had purchased a flat in India. Her choice of surrogate for her second child is also Indian, and her daughter, a second generation diasporic stays back in India finding her love and home in her country of origin, though she had never been there before. It must be mentioned that Shyama’s daughter Tara had been molested by her boyfriend, the white youth, in Britain. Shyama’s daughter finds an educated, sensitive youth for her boyfriend in India and a respectable family, though Indian men as ravagers come to the fore often as Shyama’s husband and Mala, the surrogate’s husband. The case of Nirbhaya with live protests in Delhi comes as a stirring and breath-taking instance of extortion of women in the hands of men in India.

When it comes to India, the rest of the protagonists of her novels are quite silent. Instead the Asian community in Britain comes out live in her novels. Throughout her train of three novels, whether in *Anita and Me* or *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, or *The House of Hidden Mothers*, the Asian way of projection of the West comes out clear. We get to see glimpses of confrontation when Meena’s mother is called a name for her clumsy driving. It is only by the end of Syal’s third novel *The House* that Shyama as if stands confirmed that East or West, the men emerge as faithless and are not to be trusted.

The characters throughout *Anita and Me* are characters like Mama and Papa who are very much Asian. Syal’s characters are very much Asian in their dressing, in food habits and also in their lack of faith in forming a community that would incorporate the world beyond the Asian community. India remains the home, while the hostland stands as an anchorage where the Asian people would stick to for a better life, prosperity, and advantages and money. However the adverse effects of Western sensibility which is considered thoroughly materialist is clearly evinced throughout the novels. Meena’s mother is strongly against her daughter’s association with Anita, the bad girl of the community. However Meena, the nine-

year old Asian girl is strongly attempting to build a connection with Anita, the white adolescent of her community, as this makes her quite confident of herself, for she feels she has her firm grounding in the West because of Anita, whose “fries” and Christmas gives her a knowledge of the world around, of which she was unaware of.

The “cheekiness” of the West is thoroughly abandoned and tinned food is strongly rejected in Meena’s house. It is with the advent of Nanima that her interaction with the West thoroughly stops and Meena is dragged to her Eastern notion of family ties and kinship. However Meena’s ties and confusions are strongly felt as she belongs to her hostland with an air of unbelongingness for the Asian community all about her. A similar case comes up when while of the three friends Chila, Tania and Sunita, Tania defies the Asian notion of banking on the family as the confirmed stance of a South Asian woman in the West. She takes to defying the stance that family is all and kinship ties can be formed only among people of the community across generations.

In Syal’s second novel *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, the three middle aged women, “menopausal minx”, as they name themselves, fight out their existence and each of the woman guard her premises on the guiding principle of her life, whether in terms of family, children or marriage. Sunita has her children, and quite appropriately for an Asian mother in particular she pays strict attention to her children. Tania initially poses as a *femme fatale* defying the Eastern sensibilities and finding it quite awkward as to why should one go by the Eastern ethos, ultimately she has to surrender to the demands of family where she proves her loyalty during the last rites of her father. While her brother fails, she comes up as the man of the house after her father’s demise.

Tania responds to the demands of the hour and ultimately wins over her qualm of conscience. However it must be mentioned that the bond between the women works as a powerful force. The three women in spite of their different sensibilities and diverse perspectives stay together. Tania sleeps with Chila’s boyfriend but still the friendship between the women remain and they stand steadfast in their struggle for survival. The urge to survive and the struggle for existence in a way brings the women together and they become one in their confirmed stance of survival and urge to stay put on the ground of acculturation. Though assimilation is hardly seen in the South Asian diaspora, yet the spirit of acculturation is quite strong.

A similar note strikes in Syal’s the most recent novel *The House of Hidden Mothers*, as Shyama, the middle aged protagonist transcends beyond her house of mothers to become an identity and a woman for herself. The character of Shyama ever seeks a home and for her, home is quite closely associated with motherhood. The dream of a happy home beguiles her to a new relationship after a devastating marriage back in India. As the first marriage ruins her, she looks forward to her white boyfriend Toby, much younger to her in age for the fruition of her dreams. As her relationship with Toby matures she feels her dream of a happy home coming true but for a child. She immediately takes up the decision to take up the challenge of motherhood, though it seems quite difficult at her age.

A mother to nineteen-year old adolescent, Tara, she decides to take up the strain and challenge to bear another child, however her aged womb does not seem fit to harbour one. The deep urge to create a home for oneself makes her go beyond her strict premises and instead take up surrogacy as the only option that would enable her to create a happy home with a child. Shyama bears the financial load of the family and decides that Toby would be fathering her child, while a donor would provide the egg for the birth of the child. This having decided Shyama takes the help of a surrogate and the sequence of events compel her to bring the surrogate Mala with her from India to Britain. Mala works in Shyama’s parlour, befriends her daughter Tara, and Toby too develops a soft corner for Mala. Toby and Mala apart from the similarity of their age, seem akin to each other for their belonging to the working class where they would be one with each other as they had struggled and made their place in the world through sheer labour.

As Shyama journeys to India to look after her parents under straightened condition, Toby and Mala who accidentally or through Doctor Passi’s ploy come out as the biological parents to the child, conceived in Shyama’s deep desire to become a mother again. The desire to bring home a child materializes but the house perishes as Shyama refuses to get back to Mala and Toby while the child is born and Mala and Toby are left to create a world all their own. Shyama’s dream vanishes and she ultimately becomes free of her expectations of a home that would harbour her dreams along with a child. The child contains a home and the home brews in the apprehension of a child. The child grows and Shyama notices the child in full

bloom, but in Mala and Toby's house. She expects that by that time Toby might have understood what it had meant by the child containing the Universe in its mouth. The child and the parents have formed one frame but Toby feels:

Then he had remembered the book Shyama had shown him years ago, that image of a blue-skinned deity with the Universe in his mouth. He still wasn't exactly sure what it meant, but as he stood in the garden afterwards, still watching his son on the swing kicking the heels to the sky, he felt a little closer to the answer (418).

However the end of her dreams does not end the novel. Instead her friends come to work out solidarity and create a comfort zone for her. The three women together form a home that transcends beyond the walls of a house. Just like a diasporic whose home does not stay restricted to the premises of his homeland, but journeys beyond and digs into the soil of the hostland to create a home that is all of the land of origin but with a twist, similarly her home too undergoes a twist. This home is a bigger space that accommodates numerous liberties, opening out and finding newer homes beyond the narrowness of a home with a child at the centre. As she had imagined her child would give her the fulfilment, the completion that she had ever dreamt, her new home with the perfect camaraderie of three women in their togetherness and the dire urge to keep each other happy, creates a brilliant space, a scintillating home where Shyama becomes the preserver of the Universe, the dreamer who never fails, the ideal that though can never be grasped and ever eludes yet yields in the perfection attained amidst imperfection of the journey and not the destination.

Meera Syal maintains a pattern in her novels and in the two novels that have been dealt with, there is an intricate pattern of three women working out a form that aids or inhibits the process of acculturation/assimilation. The three women form a connection among themselves and this connection makes them immune to the outer ambience. What comes up is a series of encounters both inward and outward and these series of interactions create resonances that continue even after the episodes end or newer relationships are sought. As the diasporic critic Esterino Adami speaks about the camaraderie of the three women in *Life*:

...Sunita, Tania and Chila. Their close friendship constitutes a typical sisterhood characterised by the ethnic sense of belonging. Indeed the female viewpoint dominates the novel and Meera Syal employs it as a tool to dismantle fixed clichés or collective stereotypes...(170 Adami)

In *Anita and Me* Meena and Anita form a strange relationship between themselves whereby they will become friends. Anita is the bad girl of the society whereas Meena is supposed to become the good girl of the South Asian community. In this way begins Meena's acculturation process and she finds a genuine urge to get accustomed to the culture of the hostland. As she honestly feels, "Not all the English were selfish...forgotten them." (Anita 67). Though Anita's attitude and subsequently Meena's familiarity towards the same makes Meena ill-famed in her community, Meena still gets out of her insecurity and lack of grounding in Britain only for Anita. Anita is as if her guide to the West and both make a perfect pair. However the South Asian community considers this quite inimical and stands in the way of such a relationship. To counter this bonding comes up Nanima, Meena's grandmother from India. Nanima is as if the counter pole making a different equation, that which would destroy the already formed relationship between Meena and Anita. Meena and Anita build a perfect relationship on one end and on the other end Meena and Nanima form another relationship which balance each other. A perfectly taut ground had been created until Meena sides with Nanima discarding the relationship between Anita and herself. The three women over different generations and continents pose strange response to each other making a new and unique relationship.

In *Life* Meera Syal creates a bonding between three middle-aged Asian women whose bond is so profound that the texture is close-knit and replete with a strange sense of completeness. The three women complement and supplement each other and whenever there is a need, differences wane out and the three women form a perfect bonding. This bonding stands in the way of any racial bias or adverse comments which might have come in their way. As Sunita and Chila are timid women more dedicated to the home and hearth, Tania is brutal towards any man (mostly) who would try to put them down. The new land or

the sordid state of existence would never pose any hindrance as the women would gather strength from each other and become one in their togetherness, love and friendship. Any difference between them would never pose a hurdle in the path of the smooth functioning of their relationship. During Tania's father's funeral, the three women—

From a distance they looked like a flotilla of swans, gliding between the cedar trees, iridescent flashes against the granite of stones and monuments (Syal, *Life* 330).

The three women in *Life* have their exact resemblance in *The House. The House of Hidden Mothers* is daubed in the smug profundity of a house filled with self-sacrifice and dream of fulfilment all within the confinement of a home. But when it comes to actual reality, either the dream remains unrealized or the women go heart-broken as dreams break apart posing a sorry face. In this context it needs to be said that Shyama the protagonist's relationship with her daughter undergoes a transformation with the arrival of Mala, Shyama's surrogate, who makes the relationship between the mother and daughter quite smooth. Mala to an extent stands between the mother and daughter and both become dependent on Mala for one reason or the other. Still the relationship between the three women, the mother-daughter-surrogate about to bring another child is interesting. Though this relationship flourishes or breaks or undergoes differences it hardly brings peace. Disturbances smoulder beneath the apparent strength and strong bonding of the relationship which supposedly looks brewing positivity. The three women get farther from each other and when they feel they are coming together they are actually moving apart.

However there is another series of relationships in this same novel which begins with apparent disturbances and Shyama the protagonist's two friends Priya and Lydia make the background to her story full of excitement. When Shyama is in India, they are her friends who find out Toby shopping with Mala at the Departmental store. Shyama returns heart-broken and alienated from Toby only to be relieved by her two friends who as Shyama describes:

Whilst Lydia had appointed herself unofficial nurse and all-round wise woman, Priya had been assigned the role of chief entertainments officer, showing up with tickets for the theatre or an invitation to an art-gallery opening, turning up unannounced with fish and chips and Trivial Pursuit (Syal *The House* 414).

The female experience of the self becomes more a collective existence tied to the other women in a bond of sisterhood as well as children, especially girls, who are intricately connected with the mother. This experience becomes a beyond the self state of existence, rather than being strictly adhered to the self. However the representations of different stereotypical characters, as Maggie Humm in her *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism* points out analysing Chandra Talpade Mohanty's understanding—

Mohanty utilises the skills of literary criticism, giving examples of these monolithic images from literature: 'the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife' (Mohanty 1985 , p 352). And it is in these images, Mohanty argues, that Western feminists appropriate and colonise the complex literary, oral, and cultural productions of women of very different classes, races and castes in the Third World (271).

However when looked at, these images of the togetherness as well as the different facets of women which may repeat the Asian notions of womanhood and culture at times, the concept of homeland too gets its meaning. As Robin Cohen, the veteran diasporic critic perceives in his seminal work on Diaspora; the realization of homeland also comes through, "a matrix of known experiences and intimate social relations" (Cohen 10).

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