

RESEARCH ARTICLE



TOWARDS HYBRIDITY: BILDUNG OF A DIASPORIC IN MEERA SYAL'S ANITA AND ME

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical analysis as to how Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) intervenes to reshape the field of the bildungsroman genre and focuses on the novel as a contemporary *Bildungsroman*, or coming of age story, from a postcolonial perspective. Set in the late 1960s in rural England, Syal's semi-autobiographical debut novel features growing experience of Meena, a British-Asian young girl between the age 9 and 11 who is the 'me' of the work. I argue that her worldview is partly colonised and that she undergoes a gradual process of decolonising the mind. In the process, she achieves "cultural hybridity" and learns to value her diasporic existence. The theoretical formulations of Sura P. Rath on diasporic identity and the notions of cultural hybridity presented by Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall will be predominantly utilized in this analysis.

Key Words: Bildungsroman, Indian Diaspora, Hybridity, Meera Syal

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It is a well known fact that Bildungsroman is etymologically German in origin: "*Bildung*" means formation, and "*roman*" means novel and its focus is to stress the voyage of the protagonist from childhood to psychological or emotional maturity, the literary prototype being Goethe's Wilhelm Meister. In his article 'Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends' (2006), Tobias Boes claims that the novel of development has mainly been regarded as a phenomenon of the 19th century, but that "the rise

of feminist, post-colonial and minority studies during the 1980s and 90s led to an expansion of the traditional *Bildungsroman* definition"... (231). While the traditional definitions focused exclusively on the development of the male hero, the *Bildungsroman* has expanded to include the development of the female protagonist, and then it evolved to include the post-colonial protagonist, male as well as female. This article probes the flexibility of the Bildungsroman as post-colonial novel has redrawn its storytelling boundaries by bringing into its gamut

the predominant issues of postcolonialism, such as race, class, gender, decolonization, nation, and history, which has contributed to shape the post-colonial Bildungsroman.

Such development has registered a profound impact on post-colonial fiction by the Indian diaspora. This article offers a critical analysis as to how Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) intervenes to reshape the field of the bildungsroman and focuses on the novel as a contemporary *Bildungsroman*, or coming of age story, from a postcolonial perspective. The study brings the following questions to forefront in literary debate on bildungsroman: What does it mean to "come of age" in a post-colonial and especially in a diasporic context? How do gender, race, history and beliefs influence the novel of formation? How do the conditions of postcolonialism, immigration and globalization affect the formation of the individual? And how do the post-colonial authors question, subvert and challenge the Western "coming-of-age"?

Set in the late 1960s in rural England, Syal's semi-autobiographical debut novel features the growing experience of Meena, a British-Asian young girl between the age 9 and 11 who is the 'me' of the work. I argue that her worldview is colonised and that she undergoes a gradual process of decolonising the mind and in the process achieve "hybridity" and learns to value her diasporic existence. In the beginning Meena is struggling to locate herself within the framework of English culture. She perceives very early that her family is clearly part of the society surrounding them, but the division can not be overlooked. The awareness of her cultural difference comes in the form of racial discrimination, when, on diverse occasions, she is made conscious of her colour and the general attitude towards it. She complains, "I felt . . . hurt, angry, confused and horribly powerless as this kind of hatred can not be explained" (98). Meena can not escape what in *Black Skin and White Masks* Frantz Fanon has called the "fact of blackness". As Fanon comments on the black subject's painfully heightened bodily self-conscious, "I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the idea that others have of me but of

my own appearance" (Ashcroft 1995: 325). Meena also develops an intense dislike of her Indian body which she perceives as grossly incongruent to the prevalent Western ideal of beauty and perfection. She cries out, "...I wanted to shed my body like a snake slithering out of its skin and emerge reborn, pink and unrecognizable." (156)

In her desire to integrate in the English society, Meena rejects her own ancestry and undervalues her culture. She longs for fishfingers and chips, an English Christmas, mini-skirts - but more than anything she wants to be with Anita and like Anita, a 13 year old English girl who, she thinks, is her "passport to acceptance" (148). Meena is eager to leave childhood behind, and liberate herself from the guidance and demands of her closest milieu to discover on her own what the outer world can offer. At this stage Anita completely colonizes the mind of Meena and it forecloses any attempt at hybridity. Unable to be both Indian and English, Meena rejects one culture for another. But the protagonist has a long way to go, as it is typical of the structure of a Bildungsroman, to recognize and affirm her Indian heritage in a British setting and acknowledge her hybridity.

Hybridity has been one of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in post colonial theory which commonly refers to the "creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Ashcroft 2000: 108). It can take many forms like linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc., but my concern here is "cultural hybridity." The term has been associated mainly with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, who theorized on the interdependence of colonizer/ colonized relations and the mutual construction of their subjectivities. Bhabha contends that cultural identity always emerges in the third space and finds the claim to a hierarchical 'purity' of culture untenable. For him, the recognition of this ambivalent space of cultural identity may help us to overcome the exoticism of cultural diversity in favour of the recognition of an empowering hybridity within which cultural difference may operate. Bhabha says, It is significant that the productive capacities of this third space have a colonial

and post colonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory . . . may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of the culture's *hybridity*. (qt. in Ashcroft 2000: 108-109)

Though widely interpreted and contested, in Syal's novel the idea of hybridity underlies a negation of the hierarchical nature of the imperial process and it involves an idea of equal exchange.

It becomes necessary then to decolonize Meena's mind from Anita's influence which begins with the recognition of Anita's capricious, violent nature, the unpredictability of her wayward behaviour and her dubious ethical sense. Meena learns that Anita has hidden from her that she is having an affair with Sam Lowbridge. She also listens to her account of how she has participated in a bout of "Paki bashing" in which an Indian bank manager is seriously injured and comes to realize the full implications of her gang's commitment to drink, violence and sex. In spite of its obvious negative aspects, the protagonist's relationship with Anita helps her to try her skills and capacities to take care of herself in the outer world until she attains the ability to stand on her own feet. In the course of this process she manages to define herself in opposition to her image.

Meena's growing self confidence and independence are considerably boosted by the arrival of Nanima. Meena especially appreciates her Grandmother or Nanima's skill at story-telling. The significance of storytelling in the relationship between Meena and her grandmother fulfils another fundamental function in this bildungsroman. The voice of the adult Meena mentions this fact in the very first pages of the novel: "I ... learnt very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong" (10). Thus, storytelling is central to the novel as the expression of the process of identification Meena goes through. Nanima's story makes her long for the

imaginary homeland, India of the mind of which Salman Rushdie talks, prompts her wish she spoke Punjabi, and inspires her to understand the deepest aspects of her cultural possibilities.

Awareness of one's history and traumatic past plays a key role in the development of the protagonist's character in a post-colonial bildungsroman as it is essential "to feel complete, to belong," as Meena says. The protagonist was driven by shame when they did India at school because of the humiliating portrayal of events from colonial as well as modern India in school textbooks which leads to a dislike for the subject History itself on her part. But after overhearing the sorrowful memories of her parents and their Indian friends who suffered the violence let loose during the Partition of India, Meena is deeply moved. That past belongs to Meena's people and as a consequence, it also claims her. Being a part of the collective memory provides the instrument of identification with her community and contributes to the formation of the 'imagined community' that Benedict Anderson outlines. Afterwards, her father's songs made her realise that there was a corner of her that would be forever not England (112).

Meena's diasporic development is advanced by her eight weeks stay in hospital due to a fractured leg which crashes her plans to sit for her 11+ exams. In the hospital, her first boy friend Robert gave her the confidence by assessing her as a real Midland wench. As opposed to Anita's colonizing influence, Meena's friendship with Robert reveals a potential for cross cultural communication and friendship on the basis of equality. Stay at the hospital matures her, helps her to distance herself from Anita and she decides then to heal herself "both body and mind" (284). She admits, "I was six weeks older and a lifetime wiser" (287). The novel ends with an optimistic note. Meena feels happy with herself and in a moment of sudden understanding bursts out, "I floated back down into my body which, for the first time ever, fitted me to perfection and was all mine" (326). She claims her body, overcomes the *fact of blackness* and is no longer ashamed of it. I believe, her return to her body is a metaphorical acceptance of corporeality.

It is also indispensable for time to stop at a privileged moment in a bildungsroman. The narrative time stops with Meena in the last chapter announcing,

...I was content.... I was not a bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or no place. The place in which I belonged was wherever I stood and there was nothing stopping me simply moving forward and claiming each resting place as home. This sense of displacement I had always carried round like a curse shrivelled into insignificance (303-304)

The invariably overlapping, ambivalent and blurred identity is replaced by clarity. Meena's metamorphosis indicates a new confidence in her mixed identity/ hybridity and compels a redefinition of identity in which the notions of purity and racial hierarchy are called into question. It also reinforces a redefinition of home. In his article "Home(s) Abroad: Diasporic Identities in Third Spaces" Sura P. Rath discusses positioning of diasporic identities from three points of view of home: home as place, home as time and virtual home. Meena claims each resting place as home in England. After she develops a sense of identification with her community and history, India becomes the imaginary homeland for her. She also inhabits what Rath called virtual home, which is akin to Bhabha's third space. Rath proposes Trishanku, the character from the Indian epic *Ramayana* who went 'embodied' to heaven, but had to settle at a place midway between the earth and the paradise as a metaphor for diasporic people inhabiting global-local space. But what matters here is, Meena's total self is a composite of all the three; she is equally comfortable with all and content with her diasporic identity. Syal's notion of diasporic identity is celebratory and a positive affirmation of hybridity of the writer as well as her character. The author has successfully facilitated Meena's emancipation from – and beyond – the representational closure of any single ethnicity or culture. Her heroine negotiates a pull of cultures by retaining her own cultural values while adapting to the local society in her attempt "towards hybridity". Her hybrid potential turns out to be a considerable

advantage, providing her with a cosmopolitan vision for the future.

Syal's bildungsroman challenges the traditional understandings of the novel of formation where the idea of formation implies a teleological state of being with a fixed end-point; the novel employs the more fluid sense of development to suggest a process of constant change which is progressive and regressive at different stages. Meena's final insistence to keep her "options open" (328) points to the fact that no identity is final and hints at the fluidity of cultural identity, as Stuart Hall puts it in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", "it is subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power". This shows a deviation from the usual generic pattern to pose a challenge to Western "master texts" and produces "counter-discourse."

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