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India in Britain: Myths of Childhood in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*

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Writers from the Indian subcontinent settled in Britain are continually faced with the task of expressing their new cultural reality both for their own community and the British society in general. Many of the texts that result from the between-world experience stress the negotiation of race and culture in a new setting. As Felicity Hand has pointed out, «a concern with achieving a balance between the dictates of the society in which they live and the dictates of their Asian heritage features as a recurrent theme» (9). In the postcolonial world that is Britain, where the «destructive cultural encounter is changing to an acceptance of difference on equal terms» (Ashcroft et al 36), the writing of the transcultural experience becomes a valuable tool for the formation and acceptance of the new Asian British subject. This writing, therefore, serves a double purpose: it is part of the process of the invalidation of the orientalist stereotypes that prevail in the Western consciousness (characterized by mysterious customs and traditions) and it contributes to the dismantling of the British myth (the typical Briton as the polite English gentleman, etc.) «by describing the reality of their community amidst an unknown England of violence and insolidarity» (Hand 13).

To describe a specificity of the writing of race in Britain, this paper will analyze narratives of the experience of childhood. If the between-world writer's situation is the intense reworking of questions that ultimately refer to issues as oppositionality, marginality, boundaries, displacement, and authenticity, the child's point of view is a fascinating commencement to the understanding the process of the creation of the transcultural subject. The child archetype is one of the most recurrent themes in many important writers of the postcolonial world and the use of the child character can be a powerful means of defining the responses of a country's artistic minds to its evolving cultural climate. Specifically, the paper will center on Meera Syal's novel *Anita and Me*, a first person account by a child of her apprehension of a world marked by racial divisions. Her attempts to find her place in it provides a fascinating angle through which to view the creation of the Asian British individual and her world.

The appropriateness of the theme of childhood and the use of the child narrator in between-world texts is self-evident. The dynamics of the child character make it a vivid metaphor for the quest for a definition of the cultural pluralism that incorporates the immigrant legacies of Asians, while adapting to the practices of the culture in which

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these works are created. Peter Coveney's seminal work, *The Image of Childhood*, has emphasized the advantages of the child as a literary theme in texts that center on the consequences of cultural transfer in the modern world:

If the central problem for the artist was in fact one of adjustment, one can see the possibilities of identification between the artist and the consciousness of the child whose difficulty and chief source of pain often lie in adjustment and accommodation to environment. In childhood lay the perfect image of insecurity and isolation, of fear and bewilderment, of vulnerability and potential violation (31-32).

The repetitive use of the child as a metaphor for the experience of discovery of the artist, for instance, has brought about a necessary examination of this type of narrative. Richard Coe has defined the myths of childhood that have arisen as a result of the proliferation of this theme; in narratives that have the child experience as its center, it is not difficult to identify recurrent preoccupations and obsessions which seem to operate as the symbolic embodiment of universal truths (1984b: 2). These preoccupations, these obsessions, have something of the status of myth in its modern, post-Jungian sense; as a product of a racial or a cultural subconscious, a myth of childhood incarnates anxieties, or drives, or urges too deeply buried to be clearly and rationally apprehended by the individual but which, when analyzed, demonstrate a positive and deterministic relationship between the social, cultural and religious environment in which the child grew up and his subsequent recall of those experiences in literary form.

When they rise to the surface, they do so in the form of themes, or symbols, or images which recur in the works of writers or artists having contact with one another in space or time.... There is strong evidence to suggest that the myths reveal an alternative, and profound relationship: not one of determinism, but rather one of symbiosis. (Coe 1984b: 2-3).

As such, the relationships linking memory, fantasy, imagination, and current mood are an explicit concern of many of those embarking on the writing of childhood, as these are the prime elements of the portrayal of the transcultural subject in question. In particular, the myths created in Asian British narratives tend to center on the awareness of difference and the struggle to understand one's cultural uniqueness, coupled with an obsession to fit in the mainstream; the recognition and affirmation of a hybrid identity; the need to escape; the drama of choice; the question of home; and the creation and establishment of the new self in a particular setting. These myths are vividly illustrated in *Anita and Me*.

It is clear, therefore, that the point of view employed in the telling is paramount. Of special interest are the narratives in which the prism, the perspective through which the story is presented, is the voice of a child. In contemporary literary criticism, *voice* has come to mean both the act of narrating and the aspects of a story that help identify and situate the narrator. It has become, in short, what the French critics call "identity", defined to include the narrator's point of view, perspective, focus, and stance (Otten 3). The question of who looks and who sees is crucial to the study of the presentation of

childhood in literary texts where the writer is almost always an adult. It is the interplay of two focal points, that of the experiencing child and that of the observing or reminiscing adult which tend to evolve to offer a double vision: the child's experience, and the adult narrator's use of that experience. The adult narrator often takes advantage of the imagining, the creating, the remembering, the retelling of the child's perspective to focus the experience of personal and communal identity from the very beginning. The voice of the child becomes crucial to two fundamental concerns of the presentation of the transcultural subject: how the self is constituted and how meaning itself is established.

In the case of Asian British writers, the search for a valid beginning to the telling frequently mirrors the writers' own search for the stage at which they become the individuals they now feel themselves to be. Consequently, this search for an opening, the act of recapturing the first memory, or isolating the moment when the child first becomes aware of its identity, is crucial for the narrator, as the interest is not so much in the child characters *per se* as in a state of awareness, a point of rebeginning, for which childhood is the most obvious analogy. If, as Laurie Ricou asserts, rebeginnings insist on being a framework for understanding, it follows that the narrating memory is continually searching childhood for the defining incident (35-36). In Syal's novel, the voice and experiences of the child are introduced by and filtered through the adult narrator, who focuses the experience through the telling of stories, a recurrent theme in the process of the immigrant artist's struggle to make sense of their lives.

Anita and Me opens with a prologue by the narrator speaking of the alternative histories she has found it necessary to create to fill in the details of her childhood that she lacks. Her invented memories include the dramatic story of her parent's arrival in Britain and their struggle to rise to middle-class life. Interestingly, first true memory –uncontrollable laughter at the understanding of a gag on television– is emblematic of her awareness of her unique cultural position:

[...] 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 (10).

She thus begins her meditation on events of the past, centering on childhood incidents that already contain the seed for adult reactions and solutions. Central to the discourse is the articulation of the racial and cultural question, of the recognition and affirmation of an Asian heritage in a British setting. The awareness of difference becomes a highly personal –and painful– drama for the young protagonist as she begins to grasp her position in the society she finds herself in. The perception of difference is not a political stance, as a child is usually not aware of politics. As Coe points out: «the exception is to be found when the political history of a country or of a culture is so consistently tragic that it penetrates, as it were, into the communal subconscious– in which case, once again, it acquires the status of myth» (1982: 8). The emotional

difficulties faced by this child, who has to sort out the relationship between her heritage and the cultural mainstream, is a central theme, as the protagonist hovers between loyalties and becomes obsessed with the need to choose.

Syal presents her Asian British drama in an ironically humorous mode. The comicity of some of the episodes is evidence of the adult narrator recalling and recounting the events. The adventures and feelings of the child who experiences are filtered through the adult who looks back and can appreciate the humor in the reactions of the past. Meena, the precocious 9-year old protagonist-narrator of *Anita and Me*, is continually aware of the differences between her family and her Tollington neighborhood. She perceives keenly the dividing line between relationships with other Indian families and the British. She comprehends, for example, the dead-end situation of the Tollington women, characterized by «a stoic muscular resistance which made them ask for nothing and expect less» and can contrast this with the more active acceptance of her Indian Aunties who «put everything down to the will of Bhagwan, their karma, their just deserts inherited from their last incarnation which they had to live through and solve with grace and dignity» (67). She is capable of analyzing these differences and the subtle nuances in the social interaction, understanding, for instance, that going “out” meant wherever English people were, «as opposed to Indian friends’ houses which in any case was always ‘in’ as all we would do was sit in each others’ lounges, eat each others’ food and watch each others’ television» (25). It is painful for her to realize that «in the thirteen years we lived there, during which every weekend was taken up with visiting Indian families or being invaded by them, only once had any of our neighbours been invited in further than the step of our back door» (29). Her family is clearly part of the Yard, but the division is patent.

Her parents strive to foster a sense of cultural pride in their daughter, and Meena readily identifies and takes comfort in the advantages offered by their difference. Her mother’s lectures about how not to imitate the British «[...] made me feel special, as if our destiny, our legacy, was a much more interesting journey than the apparent dead ends facing our neighbours» (59). But the child’s desire to integrate often overrides her sense of cultural belonging. She prefers fishfingers and chips to the traditional dishes her mother spends hours over the stove preparing, even as she is aware of the deeper significance of those Indian dishes: «This food was not just something to fill a hole, it was soul food, it was the food their far-away mothers made and came seasoned with memory and longing, this was the nearest they would get for many years, to home» (61). As her extended family celebrates Hindu festivals like Diwali, Meena struggles to make herself feel for the tradition. When, aware of her daughter’s bi-culturality, Dajlit attempts to explain the Festival of Lights to her, comparing it to the English Christmas, the narrator complains:

Christmas was not the best comparison to use in front of me because I naturally expected a carload of presents and the generally festive, communal atmosphere that overtook the village somewhere around late November and continued into January... But no one else in the world seemed to care that today was our Christmas. There was

no holiday.... no tinsel or holly or blinking Christmas trees adorning the sitting rooms windows in Tollington, no James Bond films or Disney spectaculars on the telly, and nobody, not one person, had wished me a happy Diwali, despite the fact that I hung around the yard all morning with what I hoped was a general expression of celebration....Everyone's indifference had stunned me. (91-92)

But her most dramatic awareness of her cultural difference comes in the form of racial discrimination, when, on diverse occasions, she is made conscious of her color, and the general attitude towards it. Racial slurs, cutting remarks, even aggression towards an Indian man are episodes which force Meena to rethink, and suffer alone, the consequences of her color: «I felt... hurt, angry, confused, and horribly powerless because this kind of hatred could not be explained» (98). For a time, her way of coping is to reject everything remotely Indian, including herself:

I had never wanted to be anyone except myself only older and famous. But now, for some reason, I wanted to shed my body like a snake slithering out of its skin and emerge reborn, pink and unrecognizable. I began avoiding mirrors, I refused to put on the Indian suits my mother laid out for me on the bed when guests were due for dinner, I hid in the house when Auntie Shaila bade loud farewells in Punjabi to my parents from the front garden, I took to walking several paces behind or in front of my parents when we went on a shopping trip, checking my reflection in shop windows, bitterly disappointed it was still there. (146)

She is forced to come to terms with who she is and the person she can and will create herself to be: «I knew I was a freak of some kind, too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench, but living in the grey area between all categories felt increasingly like home» (149-150). Her efforts to fit in the society of the Yard begin with her relationship with 13-year old Anita Rutter, the undisputed leader of the children. When Anita begins to pay attention to her, permitting her to be the co-leader of their gang, Meena's world lights up. Her admiration for Anita is doubly understandable: beyond the ordinary child's desire to belong to a group and be recognized lurks the alien child's more passionate need to be part of the mainstream, not to be considered different. Anita represented the heroic childhood ideal for the imaginative Meena:

She ruled over the kids in the yard with a mixture of pre-pubescent feminine wiles, pouting, sulking, clumsy cack-handed flirting and unsettling mood swings which would often end in minor violence. She had the face of a pissed-off cherub, huge green eyes, blonde hair, a curling mouth with slightly too many teeth and a brown birthmark under one eye which when she was angry, which was often, seemed to throb and glow like a lump of Superman's kryptonite (38-39).

Acceptance by Anita is the first step, she thinks, in being like the English kids and in ultimately rejecting being the sort of sweet, docile Indian girl her cousins are. «I could tell Anita was impressed by my authentic Yard accent; she appraised me coolly, absorbing the fact that I was younger and yet out at night without parents,

and was apparently cocky enough to assume she would want to spend some of her time with me» (122). For a time one summer, Meena finds her place beside Anita, both of them asserting their childhood bravado.

But the companionship of Anita is not enough to make her forget her racial construct, and its day-to-day implications. Incidents stand out as sporadic reminders that she is not like the others and, according to prevailing standards, inferior. A precocious interest in boys begins to worry Meena, to the extent that she writes a letter to an advice column in a teen magazine: «'Dear Cathy and Claire, I am brown, although I do not wear thick glasses. Will this stop me from getting a guy? Yours, Tense Nervous Headache from Tollington...'» (145). The advice given, to use lightly-applied foundation, to smile and be herself, coupled with the reminder that «Michael Jackson seems to do alright, and he's got the added problem of uncontrollable hair» (146), cannot alleviate the pressure of race for Meena. When Anita and two other friends try to meet boys at the fair, Meena watches and feels herself categorically judged and found lacking in the measure:

He came to rest on me, took in the winter coat, the scabbed knees, my stubborn nine-year old face, and dismissed me with amusement and, yes, relief. He had not got the short straw after all and I knew, I knew that it was not because I was too young or badly dressed, it was something else, something about me so offputting, so unimaginable, that I made Fat Sally look like the glittering star prize (105).

Interestingly, it is when she is in hospital and develops a relationship with a boy named Robert that her identity is first judged by a stranger: «Ey up, yow'm a real Midland wench, ur Meena! I thought you'd sound a bit more exotic than this!» (291). The confidence this first boyfriend gives her, as well as the maturity she must achieve when she comes to terms with his death, are crucial steps in her process to self-worth and decision.

Throughout the novel, young Meena searches for her place in the complex maze of cultural codes and signifiers that surround her. Her moment of final awareness and choice coincides with her rite of passage, a classic device in the childhood narrative wherein the formal literary structure is complete «at the point at which the immature self of childhood is conscious of its transformation into the mature self of the adult who is the narrator of the early experience» (Coe 1984a: 9). Three episodes in Meena's tenth year are pivotal in this aspect. The first is her grandmother's visit from India. The relationship the child and her Nanima develop makes her long for their country of origin, makes her wish she spoke Punjabi, makes her understand the deepest aspects of her cultural possibilities. The second event is her eight-week stay at the hospital with a broken leg, when she meets Robert, her first "boyfriend", who gives her the confidence she needs to just be herself. The final catalyzing event is the denouement of her friendship with Anita, when the latter chooses to take sides with a gang that terrorizes Indians. Meena realizes that she can and must reject Anita's way of life, and, more importantly, realizes that she no longer needs Anita's approval, as she is able to see beyond the English girl's confident facade to the helpless child who, in her turn, longs for acceptance and status but is too proud to admit it.

Meena's process of finding her individual response to the claims of differing and often antagonistic cultures is invariably painful. She is aware of the dangers any choice offers: that to barricade herself within the inherited culture is to risk narrowness and missed opportunity; to venture outside that world is to risk the solitude of rejection by both the majority and the minority culture. She knows she cannot reject her Indian heritage and the communal past she shares with the other immigrants. This she realizes at one point, when listening to her father singing traditional love songs:

Papa's singing always unleashed these emotions which were unfamiliar and instinctive at the same time, in a language I could not recognize but felt I could speak in my sleep, in my dreams, evocative of a country I had never visited but which sounded like the only home I had ever known. The songs made me realize that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England (112).

She knows that India is somehow a part of her and yearns to be truly a part of it, «[...] a country that seemed full to bursting with excitement, drama and passion, history in the making [...] I desperately wanted to visit India and claim some of this magic as mine» (211). She overcomes the embarrassment she has always felt when they "did" India at school, recognizing the country of her parent's cultural origin as a place laden with life and truth. Her desire to know and be part of that country stems from accepting it as also a part of her, which is finally the choice that will give her the security, the self-confidence and identity she has sought. No longer does Meena have the «continual compulsion to fabricate, this ever-present desire to be someone else in some other place far from Tollington» (211), because she realizes, and accepts, where her home truly lies. Her abandonment of Anita, representative of the narrow-minded racism and superficiality of the Tollington neighborhood, in favor of an education and a place in the world, is a positive step towards a self-confident independence.

I now knew that I was not a bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or 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 around like a curse shriveled into insignificance against the shadow of mortality cast briefly by a hospital anglepoise lamp, by the last wave of a gnarled brown hand. I would not mourn too much the changing landscape around me, because I would be a traveller soon anyhow. (303-304)

The novel ends on an optimistic note as Meena and her family move from Tollington; she will soon be in grammar school, on the way to a University degree. The Asian British child has come to terms with herself, her family and the communities she belongs to. But the most pressing questions, those of ultimate definitions, remain. As Hanif Kureishi points out in his autobiographical essay that deals with the same themes: «It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces:

and a new way of being British after all this time» (38). This novel, a discourse on ethnic self-definition and belonging to a community, demonstrates the questioning impulse that has characterized much of Asian British fiction, answering those queries through the story and perspective of a child. The manner in which Syal has appropriated the child's point of view as a metaphor for the fragmentation and multiplicity of ethnic lives is itself an articulation of the between-culture position and the complex process of self-identification. As such, the impressionistic perspective emphasizes the subjectivity of experience and understanding and the subsequent narrative provides enriching glimpses of a child and a society in the process of transformation and growth.

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