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Food in Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*

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Abstract: The socio-cultural experiences associated with migration and different forms of displacement can be most appropriately captured by the concept *diaspora*. Diasporic works often locate themselves in a liminal space between cultures while the female immigrant writer has the difficult task of creating a foothold for herself in an even more minimal space, being a minority within a minority. Writing by women contribute a very significant gendered perspective to the diasporic discourse as they get into the areas now known by the broader rubric of 'cultural studies' dealing with significant everyday realities like food, clothing and leisure activities while exploring identity constructions in the new spaces opened up by diasporic locations. Meera Syal's novel *Anita and Me* explores the conundrums of identity faced by two generations of Indian migrants in Britain struggling to find and retain their ethnic identity in a multicultural society.

Keywords: South Asian Diasporic Women, Acculturation, Nostalgia, the *other*, *home*.

When Meena in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* utters, "I am the *others*" she is reinforcing her author's experiences as a non white British citizen in the England of the 1960s. She begins the novel with her thoughts on immigrants being "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 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)

Syal successfully explores the contradictions inherent in growing up in Britain with immigrant Asian parents, and in living between two cultures in her debut novel. Her semi-autobiographical portrayal of a mixed-up girl trying to find her feet and in Meena's case her voice emphasises the belief that diasporic authors give expression to their experience of *relocation* through their works. This paper analyses *food* as a marker between nature and culture. In the diasporic representations of food it communicates a whole network of cultural attributes. The symbolic function of food assumes overwhelming importance, as cuisine comes to be associated with the lost or abandoned homeland of the refugee or migrant. The land left behind is equated with the food that can never be recovered.²

Diaspora in itself is a phenomenon of enormous magnitude which is reaffirmed through the ways it has taken place. Migration for better avenues does not leave a bitter aftertaste as in the case of forced dislocation. Moreover people who have a shared history of the pain of partition as in the case of major countries of South Asia like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh who can never be termed as a community in the usual sense are reformulated and comprised as a group in the foreign land. This feeling of reclaiming a sense of space through similar cultural artefacts is prominent in the writing and lifestyle of immigrants. The evocation of *home* through a shared history, geographical location, culture and cultural artefacts predominantly food forms the core of the diasporic consciousness. Meera Syal in her position as an immigrant in the Britain reveals the phenomenon of migrancy through a nuanced approach towards food and the eating habits of people.

It seems that a geopolitical invention is imagined and brought into being by a group of people residing in an area. The geographical/ political factors of a particular area affects the choices made by the writer i.e. the *group* as in South Asian Diaspora through their works

have created a distinct identity of *theirs*. Their identity as South Asian in a foreign land tends to give them a feeling of belonging. This new sense of rootedness, responsibility and belonging is the thread that binds the expatriates together. On foreign shore matters of caste, creed and religion is not given undue importance. Irrespective of differences of nationality these South Asians be it Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Srilankan or Nepali form a set consciously or unconsciously. What binds them together other than the *colour* is the basic need of food. Food develops a special affinity between the communities. The sharing of food is nothing less than a ritual, a tradition for them. This paper builds up the notion that the *food* helps the immigrants unfurl questions relating to identity, citizenship, nationality and belonging.

The story revolves around Meena, a British Punjabi girl (the "me" of the title), and her relationship with her English neighbour Anita as they grow up in the fictional Midlands village of Tollington in the 1960s. The family of Kumars comprises of the father Shyam, the mother Daljit and the little Meena who is rediscovering life in the confines of the small village. The young Meena dreams of spreading her wings with her delinquent friend Anita outside the limits of the small hamlet and above all her restricting family. Meena tired of sticking to the conformities enjoys aberrant Anita Rutter who is hostile and indifferent to any possibilities which is not in her interest while Meena's friendship is based on the premise of enjoying the unknown, of defying her typical Indian family.

Meena is in search of 'excitement, of something dramatic' happening to her. She feels in her nine years nothing of big proportion has taken place. It was before her birth that her father had arrived in "Paddington with only twenty-five pounds in my pocket" (Pg.31) to try his luck while her mother was waiting for her husband in India. He had carved a life for him and his family through hard work. Friends become surrogate families in this distant foreign land. However, it is precisely these friends, hordes of them, whom Meena detests. She feels alienated from this group of shared histories and tastes in language, music, movies and above all food. These 'non-related elders called Aunties and Uncles [and] talking in rapid Punjabi' make up her extended family. Her aunty Shaila and uncle Amman were no less than real brother and sister for her parents for it was this uncle who had helped her *papa* when he first arrived in this foreign land. They were in unison on matters related to home, heart and food which become bones of contention for Meena. She looked down upon the Saturday parties her parents enjoyed with such fervour. She felt stifled in the familiar atmosphere whereby cajoling and pulling leg were the highlights of the evening. And above all what made it memorable for each of the concerned party was the unending flow of food. Steaming varieties of food –curries, kebabs, paneer and non vegetarian snacks were in constant stages of preparation. The kitchen, in an immigrant home is not only the hub of all household bonhomie and activity but also of constantly creating and reaffirming culture.

The generational conflict between the first and second age group in *Anita and Me* is shown through food. The adolescent Meena who is trying to assimilate into the host culture of Britain is at loggerheads with her mother Daljit who through her mode of cooking, serving and eating, has *ghettoised* the whole cultural production relating to food consumption. Meena who is tomboyish in nature and doesn't favour feminine sensitivities is aghast at the kitchen and preparation of food being given undue (in her view) prominence by every other Indian woman. It is as if they lived only to fulfil the pantry responsibilities for a family. Every living space was spent planning the next big ritualistic meal. All meals, be it regular or festive one, lunch or dinner would be elaborate and a three course meal was a norm. The extent of love of a mother for her children would be judged by the quantity of meals she would prepare. Anything less would be frowned upon. A simple dinner of *fish and chips* loved by Meena was scarce in their Indian homes where sumptuous homemade meals were the norm. As a consequence an Indian girl uninterested in cooking is a *rebel*. Cooking was synonymous with

other feminine virtues of dressing in ethnic clothes, speaking in a native language and appropriate behaviour. What was valued as a code of behaviour by this generation is the retention of ethnicity while Meena longs for assimilation.

For Meena the desi/ exotic markers of ethnicity are anathema as they call attention to one's essential difference. In the village fete she realises that it is these differences that would mark you as an outsider but to her horror and dismay her elders did not realise that they stood out like sore thumbs. Meena wants to fit into the village community and to achieve her goal Meena befriends Anita who is severely grimaced by her parents but to no avail.

Syal, along with other diasporic women south Asian writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Talat Abbasi, foregrounds food as markers of cultural production in an alien land. It is this preoccupation with something as basic as food and taking that to another level, of binding that artefact with the sense of rootlessness and belonging that gives the whole feminine discourse of diaspora a distinct identity. This urgency to feel oneness with one of your own and not termed as *the other* by a person you look up to as in the case of her neighbour Sam Lowbridge who Meena likes and believes her feeling to be reciprocated. So it is nothing less than an emotion of betrayal after the incident of fete when Sam questions the community's charity to what he calls 'the others'. And not only Sam, but her so called best friend Anita too shatters her illusion, that anytime, anywhere Meena won't be one of *them*, even if she drinks a whole drum of creamy sodas.

Meena's embarrassment that her 'front garden was the odd one out in the village, a boring rectangle of lumpy grass bordered with various herbs that mama grew to garnish our Indian meals.' (Pg.15) Her introduction to the herbs by her mother was a trial for Meena. Eating 'out' always meant having food wherever English people were there as opposed to eating 'in' with the readymade family of Indians. An incident on Meena's seventh birthday reinstates the fact that food was and would be thought of as a domain of the Indian woman. Also food, like *cake* is used as an of anti-depressant as her mother is unwell and she, encouraged by her husband, tries to eat her way out of her stressful mood. Similarly the unfamiliar taste and size of the hotdog gets stuck in the young Meena's throat to give her what she dramatically feels is 'near death experience'. Everything from being deathly to acting as a life saver in terms of moods, food is the focal point in the novel.

Food is also synonymous with home. It signifies the familial bonding arising out of shared meals for example, the ³...chopped onions for the evening meal..or watched the clouds of curds form..' (Pg.34) the list is endless. Through these narratives of food and hospitality an idea of a golden past is introduced. The stories of food, cooking and eating takes on the status of iconic symbols for the lost way of life.⁴ Food also comes up as an essential part of the process of acculturation. The ethnic minority community though struck on their homemade fare is not against trying new things. But complete assimilation is not favoured at all even be it in terms of food. The incident of lard sandwiches is strongly despised by Meena's mother to the extent of her returning to her own language, 'Bakwas lok!'. (Pg.55) Moreover religion plays a dominant role in terms of food in the life of an Indian immigrant. Their sensibilities are all fine tuned by the humble *food*.

Meena finds her own home kitchen to be cluttered in comparison to Mrs. Worall's. The whole hullabaloo of 'huge bubbling saucepans where onions and tomatoes simmered and spat..bright heaps of turmeric,masala,cumin..' (Pg.61) is not liked by her. She favours the clean uncomplicated feel of Mrs.Worall's kitchen. It was as if she was in a whole new world. Fascinated by the whole process of making pastry she herself attempts it. This act of western cooking for Meena is symbolic of the freedom and sense of acculturation with Britain she is in search of. Every attempt of her mother to inculcate Meena into the mysteries of Indian cooking is strongly and unabashedly opposed. But the complete crux of the matter lies here in this conflict in food. For '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' (Pg.61). The simple acts of 'rolling out a chapatti before making it dance and blow out over a naked gas flame,'(Pg.117) was not as uncomplicated as the women made it seem. It was their way of connecting. 'Punjabis and baking don't go together...not enough angst and sweat..'(Pg.62)

Every description of kitchen and food is carefully delineated in the novel. Nothing less than an occasion would be made out of *cooking*. The whole process of cooking, serving and eating is also related to the culture of hospitality. For the Indians the guests were paramount to be a God. The chapatti making ritual 'over a naked ring frame' without actually burning your fingers is shown as a talent acquired only after marriage in an Indian women. So through food the qualities searched for and wanted in an Indian woman are also touched by. A funny yet ironical incident is Meena's mother's instance of the delivery of her son, "how she bent down to pick up a crushed kebab...brother's placenta at her feet.."(Pg.132)

The change in Meena's insight towards the Indian diasporic community with its engagement for food is perceptible after the fete incident. Her Nanima's visit collides with it and her accident later in the novel together contributes for her change of heart. This can be seen when, 'I forced myself to eat two aloo rotis which came sizzling straight from the griddle onto my plate..a glass of milk ..crushed almonds'(Pg.233) all suggest a sense of security and comfort food. The incident of supreme importance which truly shatters Meena's delusion is the one when Anita's mother Deidre runs off and Meena's family feels shattered by such a betrayal. They try to console Anita by offering her food! Though felt as something very juvenile a step it is a momentous for Meena's parents. They had never shared a table let alone a meal with any other person than Indians. Anita hardly recognises the fact and shrugs off the importance with trying to steal things from their home. She also laughs at the Indian way of eating with hands. Later too, in spite of Meena giving her different ideas she is unable to get the hint of inviting Meena to her place, her home. As Sarah Sceats writes that eating is 'the arena of our earliest education and enculturation.'⁵ For the migrant the easiest way to acculture and integrate is through food which is denied to Meena which is the last straw.

The whole journey of ABCD's (American Born Confused Desi's) in the novel, *Anita and Me* thus begins and ends with an evocation of food- as a symbol of connection, belonging as well as alienation. To sum up in Syal's text, food becomes a cultural marker: "And food is memory...Food memories, most of them forgotten or blurred, are a mystical heritage, long since digested and gone, but still lingering in our souls. Personal food, ethnic food, family food, the food of the culture in which we grew up, the food our mothers gave us- this is the eating that determines who we are,... what we love what disgusts us, and makes us feel better."⁶

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