

Search for a Double-Space: Hybrid Identities in Ravinder Randhawa's *The Wicked Old Woman* and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*

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This article intends to examine the plight of the second generation of British South Asian diasporic individuals as depicted by the two female writers Ravinder Randhawa and Meera Syal. These writers have themselves undergone various tormenting experiences as being diasporic individuals from South East Asian ancestry and their experiences are duly reflected in their writings. In these novels we find that how the diasporic individuals are torn between different identities—on the one hand, they cannot completely relinquish their longing for an imaginary homeland whereas on the other, they have to devise new coping strategies to survive in the diasporic scenario. So, these two exemplary texts examine the trials and tribulations of these British Asian writers throughout their epic endeavour to find a proper diasporic double-space for themselves.

Key Words: Multiculturalism, Diaspora, Ethnicity, Religion, Space

This article is specifically devoted to the descriptions of the writings of women writers of South Asian British diaspora. It concentrates mainly on the existential problematic relating to the lives of British Asians during a period that has already crossed the reign of Powell in the past and was experiencing that of Thatcher. The society was at its maxims of racial discrimination towards the immigrants and their lives were embedded in absolute chaos created by the existential incongruities between the British whites and the immigrants. The mentioned novel of Meera Syal traces the growth of characters of a few individuals in the latter part of the Nineteen Sixties and Seventies, a period which has just witnessed Enoch Powell's provocative racist, anti-diasporic dialogues. Randhawa's fascinating narrative in her mentioned novel encompasses typical immigrant problematics of similar types.

Quite discernibly, both the novels are spatio-temporally positioned between the 1960s and 1980s and delineate the turmoil spread through all the spheres of the then English socio-cultural terrain of the said times. These works of fiction underline the fact that cultural multiplicity is the binding feature of any successful and democratic nation, and that cultural diversity is to be acknowledged and celebrated with high spirit. Shanthi in *The Wicked Old Woman*, while acknowledging that fact that tilting towards one particular culture is not really the solution, tells Maya:

The British with their apprehensions have misguided the youth and thrown experience and age into the dustbin...our children think that by jumping into the English life they will get rid of all the Asian problems...it's only a replacement. An English set of problems for an Asian set (44).

Through the efficient rendering of Shanthi's persona, Randhawa correctly epitomizes the matured British Asians' disillusionment with their children's blind fascination with the British lifestyle and their apprehensions its distracting impact on their children. In a similar spirit, Meera Syal delineates the intricate mechanism and the long term ramifications of cultural metamorphosis in an explicatory tone through the portrayal of Meena's character. Meena, quite unlike a few other resistive Asian Britons in *Anita and Me*, is desirous for a merger with the British mainstream culture. She says:

I desired to shed my body like a snake slithering out of its skin and emerge reborn, pink, and unrecognizable. I started not looking at mirrors, I did not wear the Indian dress my mother had gifted me . . . I took many long strides while following my parents when we visited shopping malls, looking at my reflection in shop windows, angrily dissatisfied it did not go. (45)

It is observable that Randhawa and Syal expeditiously explore the British Asian woman's life to comprehend and delineate her socio-cultural and familial positioning where she is stuck in the crossroads of the mingled cultures. Moreover, she is also helplessly caught in the welter of multiple identities in a terrible mix up where she does not know exactly what she is: Asian or British.

Ravinder Randhawa hails from Punjab. She reached Warwickshire with her family at seven only to find herself at absolute dismay in a racial Britain where the immigrants were looked down on various grounds

that included ethnicity, indigenous nationality and gender. On the other hand, Meera Syal was born in Wolverhampton, England. Because of her birth on the British soil and her early exposure to the British discrimination to Asian Britons, she could at a very early stage of her life develop her coping strategies in an absolutely antagonistic and uncongenial and racially charged atmosphere. She was somehow a little better off, for obvious reasons, as compared to Randhawa. She makes interesting revelations about her crafty manoeuvres with fake story-telling and resorting to blatant lies so as to acclimatize herself into an alien culture:

She expresses her strong discontent for being discriminated for possessing a brown face in the following lines:

I watched the production of *Alice through the Looking Glass* in my standard 6th with a certain amount of bewilderment. The dialogue: 'The Rose – the bleeding rose! Ten lines and a stupid frilly costume' reverberated in my ears. But I know I'm the best actress in the class. Why haven't I got a bigger role?' The director (alias the woodwork teacher) took me aside and said kindly, 'Now then Feroza [Syal's previous name], we can't have an Alice with a brown face, can we?'(47)

Syal's designs her characters meticulously carefully to expose, dismantle and destabilize the exclusionary discourse of the British mainstream culture towards the immigrant/diasporic identities. Her famous novel *Anita and Me* (1996) provides us with more examples of such enforced cultural displacements on British Asian women. For instance, Meena Kumar, her female protagonist in *Anita and Me* (1996)—a novel that can be rampantly replete with autobiographical elements—Syal delineates the utter sense of dismay, displacement and exclusion felt by a British Asian girl in the midst of a highly segregationist culture of Tollington where she finds herself no more than like an alien from outer space.

In a similar vein, Randhawa projects her protagonist Kulwant Singh (Kuli) in *The Wicked Old Woman* as an exemplary specimen of an immigrant 'Other' who despite her prolonged inhabitation in England is still considered a cultural outcaste. In the novel's expository scene, Kulwant is instructed by the NHS nurse to gesture at Mrs. Singh through sign languages so that he would "comprehend the quiet non-verbal instructions and move away (67). The British lady did not even consider a direct verbal conversation with Mr. Singh. Perhaps one cannot get a better example of the derogatory attitude of the British towards the British Asian immigrants.

But in *Anita and Me*, Meena is ardently desirous to diffuse into the British cultural imbroglio even at the cost of her original, indigenous identity. For the purpose, she keeps indiscriminating imitating the white lady Anita Rutter who beautifies her with her mother's cosmetics so as to render her a whitish clannish look of "a sensuous British blonde" (49).

In consonance with Meena's endeavour for an absolute merger with the mainstream British society Kuli in *Wicked* intends to relinquish her natural Asian appearance by getting sophisticated cosmetic materials from the famous "Oxfam boutique": "Kuli desperately wanted a British identity, she desired to be a natural British woman. . . in an urgency to do so, she tried to scratch the brown colour of her skin to bring the mythic whiteness concealed beneath. . . (50).

It is observable that in the texts of the mentioned writers, we find a few characters, though not all, who are ready to forego their indigenous and born identity of the Asian 'homeland' and fling themselves into a hybrid space that is perennially in flux. But there are also other characters who are caught in the perplexity of indecisiveness and subconsciously cling to their original culture and homeland. Thus we find different kinds of individuals harbouring different kinds of persona and mindset in terms of the exhibition of their diasporic sensibility.

Syal's makes further experimentations in *Anita and Me* to dismantle, destabilize and topple the existing patterns of thinking about the dominant cultural individual being superior in all respects whereas the diasporic individual being inferior in the same. Despite the fact that many of her characters struggle a lot for a stable and definitive existence in the British society, they are always in the thick of things. The narrator despite her "continual ordeals with her destiny" and "many disillusionments about a happy home in England" (*Anita* 35) still continues to fight with the adversity and the confusions of her inner 'self' and comes out triumphant in the end in finding a psychic solution to her longstanding dilemma. Syal creates in her novel counter-hegemonic characters who occupy the center-stage in the narrative and in a way control the story when is unfolding whereas amny British indigenous characters are purposely pushed to the realms of silence and relegation by Syal. For instance, Meena, the protagonist in *Anita and Me* occupies the main space of action in the novel whereas the lady she follows and idolizes throughout is only a thoroughgoing mute presence in the novel.

Syal also while deliberately problematizing the idea of home that has always been the central focus of many diasporic discourses, brings into the fore the somehow hackneyed 'centre/periphery' dialectics and interrogates the common diasporic inclusion/exclusion politics. Meena becomes a site of this interplay through the exhibition of her uncanny desire to follow Anita Rutter in every aspect of the latter's life such that through this act of imitation and mimicry—to use a typical Bhaba term—she attains her much desired mythic British whiteness. Anita for her is the paragon of beauty with her blazing white complexion, cascading blonde hair and sensuous make up. Through this typical postcolonial practice of mimicry, imitation and replication, Meena tries

to create a British cultural 'niche' for herself and tries to render some meaningfulness to her dilemma-ridden existence in the midst of the diasporic embroiled cultural mix-up. Mimicry and imitations become the medium for her to settle her existential dilemmas. The incessant re-examination, re-evaluation and re-configuration of the conventional ethnic and diasporic images pave the way for what Bhaba emphatically calls the "unremitting interrogation of the notions of fixed origins" which undergo a process of "compulsive displacements" (39).

Randhawa, in close proximity with the thematic concerns of Syal, delineates the formulaic 'diasporic hybrid space' as a cloven territory crammed with constantly interacting dynamics of desire, failure, success, constructions, deconstructions, frustrations, responsibilities. It churns an individual's persona from inside. As Kuli's mother frequently tells her:

The British nation has put you in its grinder; it will dissect, fragment and churn you from inside; it will fragment your persona into myriads of unrecognizable segments; it will confuse you between what is your legitimate right and what is your responsibility. (*Wicked* 53).

In this mystified atmosphere, Kuli is subconsciously aware of the fact that perhaps the historical acrimony between India and England is the reason behind her awkward positioning in such a diasporic limbo. She knows that it is also the case with many like her.

Both these illustrious women writers intelligently and meticulously examine and interrogate the Janus-faced colonial and diasporic policies of the British people. The civilizing propaganda of the British colonial policy, according to these writers, is nothing but a blatant lie that they projected before the world. The actual purpose was to exploit the colonized land and their people with a particular interest to exploit their labour resources to strengthen their own economy. The writer duo expose the clandestine falsehood imbued within many of Britain's commonwealth, immigration and racial policies that include Asian Immigration Act 1967, African Immigration Act 1970 and the Diasporic Harmony Act 1975. *Anita and Me* not only flashes before the world the true image of the racial Britain, but also unravels the latent undertones of racism hidden beneath Britain's boastful claims of wide cultural acceptability and promotion of diversified racial harmony.

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