

Reading the Victimization of Daljit by the Institution of Motherhood in *Anita and Me*

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Abstract: This paper seeks to investigate how since a long time the institution of motherhood has victimized women who unconsciously suppress their genuine feelings of ambivalence towards the role of that of a mother that they have to adopt and adapt themselves to, how they over stress themselves in order not to be termed as ‘bad mothers’, and how in Meera Syal’s novel *Anita and Me* we can trace these issues in the character of Daljit whose condition was exacerbated by the fact of her choosing to work outside home and her being far away from her homeland in a foreign land.

Meera Syal is one of the emerging writers who have dealt with diaspora and its peripheral issues. The 1963 born writer and actress Meera Syal has very often drawn on experiences of her childhood and her struggles to negotiate between two cultures: growing up in modern Britain and the culture of her Asian parents who originated from the farmlands of Punjab, in north-east India. *Anita and Me* (1996) was her first published novel and was shortlisted for the prestigious Guardian Fiction Prize. Set in the fictional village of Tollington in the 1970s, the novel traces the life of a nine-year-old girl Meena Kumar, the daughter of Indian immigrants. A typical bildungsroman novel that *Anita and Me* is, it shows how over the course Meena develops a sense of responsibility, coupled with a sense of justice.

This novel provides a reflection on matters of migration, diaspora, cultural hybridity, myth-making, racism and violence etc. But too much preoccupation with the events surrounding the protagonist Meena and critical attention on some obvious themes of the novel have often blurred a necessary discussion about the character of Meena’s mother Daljit who might garner as much or even more critical attention than the protagonist Meena. Daljit teaches in an infant’s school at Tollington. She contains in her character the opposite qualities of softness and stringency. Daljit is looked up to by her daughter for her grace, courtesy to neighbours, kindness and opposition to prejudice. She is also a strict mother if situation demands:

“Mama rarely raised her voice but when she did get angry, she looked like one of the ornamental statues I had seen on my Auntie Shaila’s shrine [...] Mama could look like that at me sometimes, when she had caught me tearing carefully sewn ribbons off my dresses, cutting up earthworms in our backyard with her favorite vegetable knife, and most usually, when I was lying.” (Syal, 14)

She wanted to instil into Meena the same values and morals that she learnt in her childhood being born in an Indian village. The singularity in her character surfaced in her decision to live at Tollington rather than moving to a better apartment close to local amenities, unlike the other Indian families they knew. She never cared about the state of the house, focusing instead on the natural space of the countryside which reminds her of home. A lady with an opinion, she never tried to mimic the English ways and behaviour. She was most cordial to her English neighbours yet kept them at a distance, never inviting them in like her Indian acquaintances. Though the front garden of their house was a constant source of embarrassment to Meena, Daljit used to grow various herbs that she used to garnish the meals. Meena explains “my mother knew what she wanted.” (Syal, 18) A conspicuous feature of her character is her deep commitment to her family. She had internalized her primary role of a nurturer for her family so perfectly that she even sacrificed whatever little time she could spend relaxing or enjoying on her own “From the moment mama stepped in from her teaching job, [...] it would never occur to her, at least not for many years, suggest instant or take-away food which would give her a precious few hours to sit, think, smell the roses”. (Syal, 32)

Daljit gave birth to her second child when her first child Meena was nine years old. The novel only passingly mentions her hardship with her newly born child and her constant struggle to live up to the expectations of ideal motherhood, internalizing the ideology of intensive motherhood which requires a mother’s “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive and financially expensive” (Hays, 8) care for a child she considers sacred. Apart from her unending difficulties negotiating with a foreign culture her situation is exacerbated by the fact that she decided to work outside home, whether to achieve financial independence and self-esteem or to support her family or both, the novel does not make quite clear. The middle part of the novel obliquely delineates her as enmeshed in her constant striving to be a perfect mother “because so much is at stake- the physical and mental health of her children, for which she is assumed to be totally responsible” (Caplan, 1989, p. 69). She is an ever-vigilant parent to the elder one, Meena and an over-protective mother to the younger one, Sunil. Her husband Mr. Kumar as a father to his children is seen stepping back and not taking part in collaborative parenting at this point.

In *Anita and Me* Daljit organizing her time around her children and Mr Kumar stepping back from parenting responsibilities has its roots in the deeply entrenched belief in gender role differentiation a result of biological difference. The Biological functions of childbirth and lactation, associated only with women, led to the culturally constructed assumption that women are naturally more nurturing, submissive and passive compared to men. Social Darwinism, following from evolutionary theory (e.g., Campbell, 2002) also highlights the different, but complementary, biological functions associated with men and women for the survival of the human race and accounts for lesser intellect

and greater propensity for nurturing. Freudian psychoanalytic theory also strengthens the prevalent perception of gender difference and an essential feminine trait in women. However, what makes it more problematic is that these traits have become both descriptive and prescriptive in that “ people believe not only that women are caring and nurturing but that women should be” (Cole et al., p.212). This long-held conviction in the differential gender roles assumes women to be biologically conditioned to undertake domestic roles and elevates men to the position of authority. But the Theory of biological determinism often obscures the implicit patriarchal politics to control production and distribution of resources allocating domestic tasks, including child rearing, to women. This asymmetric parenting is responsible for internalisation of a gender- specific structure and for perpetuation of a division of labour in which men exercise public power and women take care of children.(Chodorow)

The patriarchal structure promotes intensive Mothering as the best model for childcare which is put squarely on the shoulders of mothers. Intensive Mothering dictates that children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother who will be available 24/7 and put children’s needs before her own, she must be fully satisfied, completed and composed in motherhood and lavish excessive amount of time, energy and money in the rearing of her children. Whether the mother is working outside or not has little effect on this model. Women work outside their home for reasons not different from that of men: for financial support for family and herself, for personal satisfaction and for social purposes. But that has not made a case for women to be released or at least relieved through shared responsibilities from the crushing duties of domesticity and child rearing, the duties that have been ascribed to her in the process of her internalizing her gender role.

In *Anita and Me* the hardship of Daljit flared up after she gives birth to her second child Sunil. Her daughter Meena says:” nothing was the same for me and mama once Sunil came to live in our house, his house “(Syal 69). Though a little child and somehow jealous of the presence of another child who happened to be the ‘latest attraction’ of the locality, Meenavaguely understands that her mother is having a tough time balancing her work as a school teacher and her domestic responsibilities to which a new addition is her new born Sunil.

Meena, the narrator of the novel, reminisces ‘ she was too tired for me anyhow and she still came back from school and went straight into the kitchen. “ On coming back from her work,Daljit after a hectic day occupied with Parent’s Day and other activities in her school prepares for her daughter’s birthday party but goes absolutely unacknowledged and unappreciated for the same. Though Meena’s father advises Meena to help her mother as she is overworked, on very few occasions he himself is seen helping his wife to relieve her from the domestic drudgery. One can safely assume that she must have undergone the same trials during her pregnancy and post-natal periods when Meena was born.

Over dependence on only one parent inevitably leads Meena being jealous of the presence of Sunil as they both compete for attention from their mother. People around her, like Auntie Shaila even admonishes Daljit in her usual cynic attitude for her always carrying Sunil stuck to her bosom. But this excessive investment of time and energy can be seen as a way of compensating for her time away from her children as a working mother, the ambivalence and guilt she feels about working and enjoying the work she does. However, this tremendous pressure of her everyday, devalued, invisible domestic chores and her motherhood responsibilities take a toll on her, making her clumsy at work and life. Trying to work up to the ideals of a good mother, a perfect homemaker and a good worker, she often failed miserably in everything she did, she kept up an “ an appearance of efficiency, but actually finishing nothing properly. “

But Daljit is never any closer to admit her gradual physical and mental collapse even at this point. She is clearly weighed upon by the principles of what Betty Friedan called a “feminine mystique”, of a delusional, pervasive system which expects women to find fulfilment from their housework, marriage, sexual lives and children. Bing and Colman also suggest that the feminine mystique is still lurking in the unreasonable, even impossibly high expectations women set for themselves especially when it comes to motherhood. The feminine mystique that women in this culture are raised with is that mothers are expected to define themselves in relation to their families, whether they are working outside or not.

Stereotypes of perfect mother and a strong social pressure to be overjoyed by motherhood leave Daljit hesitant to express her social isolation. The support that she needed from her family to maintain her ‘psychological and physical integrity’ (Caplan and Killilea: 13) was lacking completely.

Rich also feels that because motherhood has become an institution, most women are expected by the society to forfeit the complexity of their identities in order to become simply a “mother”, to devote their entire energies to loving, nurturing, instructing and educating their children. Rich writes, “We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us in the name of the institution of motherhood” (275)According to the norms of this institution, if fathers help, mothers are grateful for the gift. But what makes the mothers role undeniably imprisoning is the obligation to being affectionate to them without being irritated with them. What remains to be considered is the fact that to love children realistically is also to be impatient with them, to respond to them irrationally- often angrily- even to reject them temporarily and to know that those bonds will survive.

The novel charts how slowly Mrs. K confines herself to a world that consists only of her workplace and her home. She ingeniously labours towards integrating the two world’s of home and workplace never being at variance with the responsibility that society has obligated on her as a woman who has to meet the everyday needs of her family, right down to managing the logistics of her family dinner. Meena observes, “ Nowadays, she seemed to exist in a self-contained world of nappies, cleaning, cooking and fitful twitchy catnaps, brief moments in between my brother’s

incessant, cheery demands.”(Syal, 89) The condition of her mother does not go completely unnoticed by Meena. Therefore, though admonished for her suggestion to drop Sunil at the orphanage for a trial period, Meena’s reaction might be seen as stemming not only from her jealousy towards her brother but also from her concern for her mother. Daljit’s taking the baby even to the toilet and leaving the child at the nursery under the carers(90) before leaving for work, portray the common experience of all mothers. Gradually some obvious signs of postpartum depression and mental health issues due to intensive Mothering demands overwhelm her with their onslaught on Daljit “Her tearful door slammings and tantrums had gradually disappeared, to be replaced with long, exhausted silences or more frightening blank stares” (Syal, 90) She became distant from the rest of her family, as if a person removing herself from uncomfortable company of strangers, silently suffering in an attempt to meet the expectations of both her family and her workplace, resisting a spill over effects. She becomes numb to the excitement and recreations of life “Mama barely looked up as Papa and I told her we were off to the fete “. (Syal, 90) Gradually a strange silence overtakes her until one day she screams out feeling utterly helpless “ I can’t cope anymore, Shyam. Back home I would have sisters, mothers, servants

...” (Syal, 103)The bulging sorrow of a woman singlehandedly trying to manage her household removing herself from all the glitters of the world finally breaks out “I can’t do this anymore, I can’t. “(Syal, 103)

Daljit , like most women, is unable to understand that the root of her pain and anxiety lies in her attempt to perform as per the ideals of intensive mothering. She sounds distant, her voice of an unknown poet to the little Meena, her house seems to push downwards into the earth. Moved by her entreaties Mr. Singh brings Daljit’s mother from overseas. That the arrival of Nanina and help from her, howsoever little, resuscitated Daljit highlights the fact all the more that Daljit was so overworked and lonely without support. The arrival of Nanima of course brought some differences in the daily routine: “ Nanima’s presence magically allowed Sunil to distance from asphyxiation relationship with Mama. Meena finds herself happy to care for Sunil, whereas once she used to hate such tasks. Now Sunil becomes everybody’s business, but even now the participation of Mr. Kumar in this business is seen as minimum as possible, except in occasion like, taking Meena to the fete or Sunil having his breakfast sitting on his lap. At night Sunil used to wake up frequently and then Daljit would again try to sooth him to sleep all alone. When nanima comes she shares this responsibility of rocking Sunil to sleep during his midnight waking and habituate him sleeping through the night in his cot. Mr. Kumar is exempted from adjusting his routine to the needs of his children.

The separate spheres ideology for the different social roles of men and women relegates man to provide for the family and women to perform domestic duties restricted women’s involvement in public life. This separate spheres ideology meets with contradiction when it comes to mother’ s employment. Their employment outside home is further exacerbated by the fact that it does not make them seem more deserving of support from family in child rearing. The prejudice around gender roles absolve fathers from all child rearing and domestic responsibilities. Constricted by the perception of gender roles women fail to see “the structures that shape their apparent inner urge to feel compelled to devote themselves to children.” If the “ mothers were acting purely out of self-interest, the choice to devote more hours to paid work outside home would make them better- off economically, as would the choice to forgo having children altogether “(5) Loy speaks of a family devotion schema and it’s prescription for motherhood. He says “ Women’s devotion to the family triumphs all other commitments.” Even if they also engage in work outside home, it is their primary duty to give their children absorbing and time-consuming care. Petra Bueskens argues that “Infancy and early childhood are periods of high emotional and physical dependency and moreover, this is not a pure invention of patriarchal science. “ (81) However, as Bueskens continues, “The problem is not the fact of this requirement but rather that meeting this Need has come to rest exclusively, and in isolation, on the shoulders of Biological mothers “(81)

Just as her burden seemed to have relieved to some extent and the household reflected some sort of order Nanima decides to leave for India. The novel chooses to focus on the surge of emotion in Meena who felt her world shattered and a chasm in her heart cracking open somewhere at Nanima ‘s departure. But there is not even a slight mention of Daljit’s reactions and her tribulations at her mother’s departure or whether the household was back to the disorderly condition that prevailed before the arrival of Nanima.

In conclusion it can be said that the novel which ventures an in-depth exploration of the issues around diaspora and racism, pays scant attention to how perception about gender roles marginalises the women further and makes their lives unbearable in a foreign land. If Mr. Kumar is not seen partaking in the responsibility of the household, Mrs. Kumar is also never seen asking him for it. They are so much steeped in the ideology of perfect gender roles that they perform it without realising the irrationality of its rationale. Towards the end of the novel Meena's father is awarded a promotion, and it is a sufficient proof of how work devotion schema (Loy) which requires investment of a lot of time and emotional allegiance to the workplace, has worked for him.

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