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碩士論文

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摘　　要

本論文主要藉由閱讀印度裔英國女性作家蜜拉・賽耶爾（Meera Syal）的《安妮塔與我》及《生活不全是嘻嘻哈哈》以探討身為英國南亞移民的蜜拉・賽耶爾如何書寫其離散經驗及南亞裔女性對於英國和原生文化雙重影響的回應。生於長於英國的蜜拉・賽耶爾在其成長過程中深受充滿西方意識型態的英國文化影響，同時又受到原生印度文化的教導和傳統觀念的約束，身兼劇作家、作家、製作人及演員等多重身分的她成功地將其生命經驗以詼諧卻深刻的方式投射於作品之中。蜜拉・賽耶爾初試啼聲之作《安妮塔與我》描繪在英國六〇年代下，一個居住在已漸凋零的挖礦社區裡的南亞移民家庭和其白人鄰居，又或和時常來訪的南亞裔故友們之間有著趣味卻又發人省思的互動，尤其蜜拉・賽耶爾帶領讀者透過九歲女主角蜜娜（Meena Kumar）的觀點去觀察身處在移民家庭和西方文化之間的第二代青少年如何面對不同文化的衝突，以及她如何在雙重文化夾擊下去摸索並釐清自身的歸屬感，在蜜娜找尋自我的過程中，她意識到自身的中介特質（in-betweenness）不再是一種徬徨的不確定性（uncertainty），反而是一種她所特有的優勢。蜜拉・賽耶爾的第二本小說《生活不全是嘻嘻哈哈》不同於前本小說的人物、時空等背景敘事，進一步地刻劃成熟南亞裔女性在婚姻、兩性關係及家庭之間所面臨到更為複雜、更為難解的生命課題。延續著南亞移民第二代身處雙重文化下的自我徬徨，《生活不全是嘻嘻哈哈》描述三位在英國九〇年代晚期的倫敦大都會生活的南亞裔女性，蜜拉・賽耶爾透過這三位有著不同的成長背景及性格的女性呈現出更為寫實並震撼人心的文化、家庭甚至是兩性之間的衝突和矛盾，她們必須在傳統責任（家庭、婚姻及族群）及個人意志之間找出一個平衡點，甚至做出抉擇。從《安妮塔與我》到《生活不全是嘻嘻哈哈》，蜜拉・賽耶爾書寫出身處英國的南亞裔女性對於自我的體悟、檢視、反思進而建構主體的過程，而蜜拉・賽耶爾所定義出的南亞英國女性正是本論文所關切並進行討論之重點。

關鍵詞：蜜拉・賽耶爾、《安妮塔與我》、《生活不全是嘻嘻哈哈》、不確定性、中介性、自我探索（追求）、南亞英國女性

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ABSTRACT

By reading Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* and *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, this thesis project would like to explore how the South Asian British woman writer Meera Syal writes about diasporic experiences especially that of the second generations of immigrant women. I shall first present a review of histories about the South Asians' immigration to Britain as well as the background of Meera Syal to see how she relates her own lived experiences with her professional career as a playwright, writer, producer and actress. Syal's debut novel, *Anita and Me*, portrays how an Indian immigrant family interacts with their British neighbors in a sub-urban area during the 1960s. Through the perspective of the nine-year-old protagonist, Syal depicts the acute sense of dislocation of this child of an immigrant family and the later (re)formation of her identity. Her second novel, *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, which can be seen as a kind of sequel to *Anita and Me*, focuses instead on the lives of three adult women of South Asian descent. By presenting the lives of the three London women in the late 1990s, Syal illustrates the tremendous changes that women of South Asian are facing in terms of relationships and belief systems. Syal discloses a more complex yet reality-reflecting account of circumstances faced by South Asian women in Britain. From *Anita and Me* to *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, the different age groups and settings sketch a relatively comprehensive spectrum of South Asian British womanhood.

Keywords: Meera Syal, *Anita and Me*, *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, uncertainty, in-betweenness, self-discovery, South Asian British womanhood

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Table of Contents

Chapter One

Introduction: South Asian Voices in Britain

> Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group.
>
> — Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

The second half of the twentieth century saw a great increase in large-scale immigration, including people who fled war, persecution and poverty, or who looked for a better life. In fact, Continental Europe experienced two distinct forms of immigration in the postwar period.[1] Some European countries, notably Germany, encouraged immigration through labor recruitment. Other countries, such as Britain and France, received vast inflows of people from their former or present colonies. For an extended period of time, the majority of immigrants to Britain were from the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean. Today, people of South Asian descent collectively constitute the largest ethnic group in Britain.[2] They are not only considerable in terms of population number but also have immense influences upon the whole British society. However, South Asians have gone through a difficult journey before Britons approve of their influences on the British society. It is also noteworthy that most South Asians, the second and the third generations in particular,

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[1] Post-war or postwar is defined by *Oxford English Dictionary* as "pertaining to, or characteristic of the period after a war." Naturally, a postwar period, in Western usage, refers to the time following the ending of the First and the Second World Wars. The "postwar" in my thesis is used to mark the period of time after the Second World War in particular.

[2] South Asians in Britain mostly refer to those who immigrate from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and their descendents. Even the BBC News groups list these countries under "South Asia" on its website. And on the authority of 2011 UK Census, a nationwide census conducted every ten years, South Asians make up approximately 4.0% of the total population of the UK and 50% of the UK's non-white population. The most recent census of the UK took place on March 27 2011.

encounter the uncertainty of self identity—resulted from their position in between two divergent cultures. Nonetheless, some of them integrate those distinct cultures and further develop the perception of "in-betweenness" into a positive initiative for higher achievement. This thesis project would like to explore how the South Asian British writer Meera Syal displays the power of ethnic in-betweenness through writing about diasporic experiences, especially those of South Asian women of the British-born generation, in *Anita and Me* (1996) and *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999). Within the two intriguing novels, Syal veritably offers a relatively comprehensive spectrum of South Asian British womanhood in the postwar Britain.

Postwar Britain not only allowed the entrance of colonial immigrants but also encouraged labour migration. Nevertheless, the successive decline of Britain's economy and power consequently made the issue of immigration the most vexed problem that Britain has confronted. Therefore, immigration control becomes a policy debate between different parties, especially during election time. The response to the immigration issue has mostly concerned about the growing populations and the problems of unemployment, poor housing, and even street crime. According to James Hampshire, it is all about "racial."[3] In British society, the "non-white" immigration has been predominantly viewed as a negative term. Some politicians even have made a supposed link between the "non-white" immigrants, diseases, and violent crimes. Therefore, British government drew up certain policies on controlling immigration. The decision made up by politicians, nonetheless, becomes "an official policy of discrimination" (Brown 9) such as Commonwealth Immigration Act (1962) and Enoch Powell's speech of "rivers of blood."[4] Non-white immigration, in brief, has

[3] Hampshire, in *Citizenship and Belonging*, argues that immigration is unwelcomed by the receiving country; furthermore, he critically points out the policy such as immigration control in postwar Britain has a racial demographic purpose because "they were intended to prevent, or at least limit, Britain developing into a multiracial society" (11).

[4] Enoch Powell (1912-1998) was a British politician and served for the Conservative Party. In 1968, he

been perceived as a "problem" associated with social disorder that needs to be "controlled" (Hampshire 10). Undoubtedly, South Asians, the major group of non-white immigrants in Britain, have been discriminated against by this problematic prejudice. Under the Imperial regime, although they can enjoy the same citizenship as indigenous Britons do, they still have been regarded as those who do "not belong in Britain" (Hampshire 16). In other words, the racialized debates on immigration control and the imputation of social malady have made most South Asians feel "unhomely" in Britain—the supposed Home.[5] As mentioned, the South Asian British people are regarded as minority because of misconception and unfairness bestowed on them. Yet, the performance of South Asian British people is by no means "minor" but outstanding and significant.

When referring to the achievements of South Asians, Shinder S. Thandi proposes a term "Asian Cool" to describe the vibrant South-Asian presence in British popular culture. South-Asian food and outfit, which once had been derided as "smelly 'colonial' food" and "peasant-like garments," now are accepted as authentic ethnic fashions. Owing to the increasing popularity in both cuisine and fashion, celebrations or street parades of South-Asian festivals have also gained attentions. Thandi makes note that they "are all cultural expressions of this new confidence and re-affirmation of new hybrid British-Asian identities" (198). By examining different dimensions in popular culture such as the media and performing art, he highlights that South-Asian culture is definitely chic in Britain now. Perhaps the most significant achievement is that South Asians associate new thoughts from the host country with their cultural expressions inherited from the mother country. This combination results in a potent

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made the controversial speech "Rivers of Blood" criticizing on Commonwealth immigration. The speech invokes a fierce storm of protest around the British society, especially among the non-white ethnic groups. This period of history also plays an important role in Meera Syal's writing background.

[5] The "Home" here is capitalized to emphasize that most South Asian immigrants have viewed Britain as a symbol of homeland, apart from their real hometown, after the long period of colonization. But it is ironical that Britons seldom accepted these people of South Asian descent as one of their groups.

voice consists of Asians's belief and the younger generations' rebellious yet innovative expressions. Such a "fusion" of traditional inheritance and modern culture has grown into a powerful medium which enables South Asians to regenerate new possibilities in Britain. As a matter of fact, the new angles of identity have already been discussed by Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*, which reads:

> Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. (15)

South Asian British writers, such as Hanif Kurieshi, Monica Ali, and Meera Syal, all obtain such a double identity described by Rushdie. The double or even plural identities result in an uncertain feeling about their social position. Nonetheless, such doubleness or plurality also affords South Asians an opportunity to make use of the uncertainty—or "the in-betweenness"—to redefine themselves in British society.

The concept of "in-between" firstly derives from the postcolonial theory, and it is exemplified as a liminal space by Homi K. Bhabha to demonstrate the ambivalence between the colonizer and the colonized. In his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha elaborates the idea of liminality through the example of Renée Green's museum installment. He explains that Green's stairwell, connecting the attic and the boiler room, is transformed into a liminal space. According to Bhabha, this particular space locates "in-between the designations of identity, [and] becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white" (5). In general, the concept of liminal space discussed by Bhabha mainly refers to the slippery features within the binary

relationship in postcolonial discourse. However, it involves a notion of in-betweenness that can be applied to an uncertain condition bore by those who have difficulty in defining themselves. As Bhabha points out,

> [t]he move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions—of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation—that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world . . . . These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2)

In sum, the in-betweenness can possibly be found among those people or communities located "in-between" different cultures. They occupy an in-between position, which does not belong to either culture but actually bridges the two.

In *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*,[6] Amy Ling argues that a "between-world consciousness" (105) is a dual characteristic of people in a minority position. Ling defines it as a "feeling of being between worlds, totally at home nowhere" (105). The "between-world consciousness" with which Ling uses to characterize the duality of American-born Chinese women equally characterizes the in-betweenness of South Asians in Britain. People with in-betweenness might find themselves lost in a liminal space belonging to neither side. And the pain of loss would be intensified by uncertainty in their in-between position. As Ling states, "For

[6] Amy Ling's *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* concerns about women writers of Asian American literature. She talks about the duality and complexity between two worlds by drawing examples from the literary works of Chinese American writers such as the Eaton sisters, Amy Tan, and Maxine Hong Kingston. Her response to the between-world condition of women in Asian American literature fairly characterizes the in-between position shared by South Asians in Britain. Ling's focus on women writers and her positive attitude toward the in-betweenness support my argument about South Asian British womanhood.

the person between worlds, the loss is intensified: it is both physical and psychological, for it is loss of the mother as well as loss of the motherland" (108). However, it shall be noted that the in-betweenness does not only carry negative charges. It also brings positive strength to the between-world people. When Amy Ling expounds how Chinese American writers right people's prejudices by writing, she lauds the privilege deriving from the in-betweenness. She first interprets the in-betweenness as a condition "occupying the space or gulf between two banks; one is thus in a state of suspension, accepted by neither side and therefore truly belonging nowhere." (177). Then, on the positive side, she speaks for the in-betweenness and recognizes it as "having footholds on both banks and therefore belonging to two worlds at once" (177). For South Asians in Britain, being trapped in-between the cultures of the homeland and the host society is unavoidable. So it is important that how the between-world people make use of their in-betweenness.

Along with the long history of immigration in Britain, South Asians have experienced the struggle between past and present, old and new, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. Although they have been trapped by bitterness and suffering resultant from the in-between experience, they have made the in-betweenness become a privilege to reverse their social position. They have tried to attune all the cultural differentiations, once seen as conflicts, into making "newness" out of the past and the present. The term "newness" here does not refer to the chronological continuum but is rather a notion of the new in culture and identity. Bhabha suggests that work of culture, especially the "borderline" work, bears the form of newness. Such work of culture de facto "renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (Bhabha10). Furthermore, while speaking of newness in the borderline works, Bhabha also points out that the essential element "past-present" now has become "the necessity, not the nostalgia, of

living" (10). Thus, South Asian British writers cannot cling solely to the new British culture and reject the old South-Asian one. They have to reconcile the past and the present and incorporate the two into a new voice.

The art or literary work can be the best way to present the new voice of in-betweenness to the greatest extent. Through writing, South Asian British writers project most of their life experiences into their writings. They not only make stories but also exquisitely map out potential energy that lies in their in-between position in British society for themselves as well as for their descendents. Writing not only provides them a way to voice their uncertainty, conflict, and struggle in the host country, but also makes them reflect on how to reconcile the differences between two cultures. Writing, moreover, provides a way into a process for South Asian writers to achieve self-understanding and to discover power and perseverance in their in-betweenness. In order to explore how South Asians overcome the hardship in being as immigrants and finally acquire their place in British society, this thesis project attempts to employ Meera Syal's debut novel *Anita and Me* and its sequel *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* to be the principal focuses of discussion.[7]

From New Delhi, Meera Syal's Punjabi-born parents came to Britain in 1960.[8] Syal was born the next year and then she was brought up in the mining village of Essington, on the outskirts of Wolverhampton in the West Midlands. She received British education and went to Manchester University to study English and Drama. Syal is talented. Her outstanding performance in acting both on radio and television and her impressive ability in creative writings well demonstrate her capability and

[7] In fact, Syal does not clearly define *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* as a sequel of *Anita and Me*. However, from the settings of characters to the storylines in both novels, it can be found that Syal attempts to complement and continue the concern about South Asian women's social position and dilemmas in life. In later discussion, I will exemplify Syal's intention in employing these two novels to present a relatively comprehensive spectrum of South Asian British womanhood.

[8] Details about Meera Syal's upbringing backgrounds and careers are derived and collected from Internet sources, especially her talks in interviews. Please see Chris Green, Rebecca Hardy, Gaby Huddart, Indi, Alice-Azania Jarvis, Jack Lefley, Nick McGrath and Dan Waddell.

creativity. When she was a college student, she won the National Student Drama Award with her performance in *One of Us*, scripted by Jacqui Shapiro and staged at the Edinburgh Festival. Later she wrote the script for the acclaimed film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), directed by Gurinder Chadha. She also joined the team in writing and performing in the BBC comedy sketch series *Goodness Gracious Me* (1996-2001) from which she earned her fame. Because of the success of the show, Syal began to get recognized. Subsequently, she played an outrageous grandmother and made herself almost unrecognizable in Sanjeev Bhaskar's comedy talk show *The Kumars at No. 42* (2001-2006), which was awarded the International Emmy in both 2002 and 2003. Syal has doubtless become one of the best known faces on TV screens in Britain. Aside from her achievements in acting and hosting, Syal's genius for writing is also well acknowledged. In 1996, she published her first book *Anita and Me*, a novel about the inner and external conflicts in the life of a nine-year-old girl of South Asian descent. Later, the novel was adapted into a film, in which Syal was casted a minor character. About three years later, her second book *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* was published and further made into a three-part BBC TV miniseries in 2005. Syal was the lead in the series.

In common with characters in her works, Syal is potentially rebellious in her personality: she often uses her wit to subvert ossified thinking and challenge social authority. In fact, Syal possibly inherits her defiant nature from her family. In the eyes of the more traditional generations in India, her parents are comparatively unconventional because of their different religious backgrounds: her father, Surendar Syal, is a Hindu and her mother, Surinder Syal, a Sikh. After a seven-year secret romance, they finally got married in Delhi in 1958. Surendar headed for Britain to study accounting in 1960; a few months later, Surinder set her foot on the land of Britain to join her husband. Meera Syal's parents originate from the farmlands of the

Punjab, in north-west India. Although the Syals are from a small village called Lasara, Surendar Syal did grow up in Lahore during the 1930s because his father, Tek Chand Syal, had decided to go for better prospects. As a student at the DAV College in Lahore, Tek Chand was keen on participating in student protest movements against the British rule. In 1936, Tek Chand decided to join the radical newspaper *Milap*, at the vanguard of the Indian independence movement, to initiate his career as a journalist and still endeavored to fight for the independence of India. The struggle for independence from Britain eventually ended in 1947, but the success was won at a hard price—the Partition—which cut Punjabi into two, with one part as the separate state of Pakistan, and the other one as part of India. When the Partition took place, the Syals, like millions of other Partition refugees, were forced to abandon their home and flee to Delhi. The family of Meera Syal's mother demonstrated "rebel roots" too. Meera Syal's maternal grandfather, Phuman Singh got involved in Jaito March in which he paraded with hundreds of other Sikhs to struggle against the British for two months. During these marches, more than 300 Sikhs were killed and up to 20,000 were arrested, Phuman Singh was among them and was imprisoned for more than a year. In 1972, he was awarded a Freedom Fighters Pension.

As illustrated above, literary writings more or less involve the upbringings and experiences of writers. And it is apparent that Meera Syal merges most of her lived experiences in South Asian community and the history of her family genealogy into novels. Through storytelling, Syal employs her characters to reveal the conflicts within culture and ethnicity confronted by South Asian women in immigration. For her, writing not only responds to her in-between position but also voices for those who are in the same situation. Remarking that "actors don't have much power but

writers have the power to change things,"[9] Syal intends to provide a platform for the concerns of South Asian British women and to "challenge stereotypical notions of a unified and unchanging female 'South Asianness' in Britain (Hussain 14). By following the storyline in her works, her readers can clearly see her ambition in trying to portray a world of conflict and uncertainty, and they also might be impressed by the unyieldingness revealed in Syal's literary creation. Syal glorifies her inheritance from South Asian traditions, and includes the new thoughts from her growth in Britain into her writings. At the same time, she creates an "in-between" space which does not solely cling to the South Asian culture or to the British but is a space permeated with her "double perspective" (Rushdie 19). Through depicting the change in her four protagonists, Syal ingeniously demonstrates a relatively comprehensive spectrum of South Asian British womanhood. She embraces both cultures and shows audiences the in-betweenness existed in the "in-between subject" (Wilson 113). She seems to declare that she is "neither here nor there," but actually "both here and there" (Ling 176) so that she can travel back and forth in-between two cultures.[10] Therefore, by examining the different age groups and distinct settings within *Anita and Me* and *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*,[11] we can see how Meera Syal presents South Asian British womanhood through the intense power of in-betweenness.

Janet Wilson, in "The Family and Change: Contemporary Second-Generation British-Asian Fiction," proposes that a second-generation immigrant, such as Meena Kumar, is often "doubly estranged" (112), first from their family and tradition culture, and then from the British society. Yet, Wilson holds a positive view that whilst Meena

[9] About Syal's statements, please see the Interview with the website *Desi Blitz* http://www.desiblitz.com/content/meera-syal-mbe.

[10] The excerpt is borrowed from Amy Ling's discussion about Stephanie Ryder's "between-world consciousness" in Han Suyin's *Till Morning Comes* (1993). The original excerpt is "Stephanie Ryder epitomizes the successful resolution of the between-world dilemma. She is not 'neither here nor there'; she is both here and there and able to travel frequently back and forth between the two points" (176).

[11] *AM* and *Life* respectively refer to *Anita and Me* and *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* in the parenthetical references hereafter.

is oftentimes doubly estranged in the mixed circumstances, she "acquires new value as she comes to distinguish between the self defined by culture of origin and the self defined by her culture of re-location, and learn to blend the two" (113).

Graeme Dunphy also brings up Meena's in-between position in "Meena's Mockingbird: From Harper Lee to Meera Syal" and agrees that "She must be both English and Indian to survive, and this duality is at the core of her struggle for identity" (650). Dunphy in fact connects Syal's *Anita and Me* with Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and talks about the intertextuality between the two.[12] In addition to the intertextual echoes, "writing back" is another topic that Dunphy has discussed. First he compares the two works, which have different backdrops but share the same features of "writing back," and then brings in more specific analysis about the in-between position that Meena holds. He argues that Meena is somewhere in between and fundamentally "more foreign in India than in Britain" (650). But her duality, standing above and apart from both cultures, will make her be "strong enough to survive—in Tollington, or wherever she chooses" (Dunphy 657). Dunphy, moreover, points out that both Meera Syal and Harper Lee attempt to "write back" to quest for a kind of integrity through their young heroines' perspectives. Being a bit different from Lee's focus on integrity for community, Syal's "writing back" is to achieve the integrity of self which is suggested by Dunphy: "'Writing back', Syal's quest is also for integrity, but for a different aspect of integrity, namely the courage to carve out one's own identity and live by it" (656).

Dunphy regards the process of Meena's self-discovery, or self-construction, as Syal's attempt to write back to quest for an individual integrity, to find the completeness for second-generation South Asian British people. He also reviews the

[12] The 1960 classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel by Harper Lee, won the Pulitzer Prize. It has been a classic of modern American literature. Graeme Dunphy's article mainly shows how Syal's novel *Anita and Me* takes Lee's work for inspiration.

so-called "writing back" in *Anita and Me* through a post-colonial perspective. Berthold Schoene-Harwood, likewise, interprets Syal's novel from a post-colonial viewpoint in "Beyond (T)race: *Bildung* and Proprioception in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*," with the focus on the novel as a *Bildungsroman*.[13] In the beginning of Shoene-Harwood's article, he defines conventional *Bildungsroman*, also known as "novel of self-formation," as a genre that characters do not in fact change, but develop themselves from an initial position of "social ostracism" to "perfect societal integration" (159).[14] Shoene-Harwood elaborates that the consistency of characters in conventional *Bildungsroman* is no longer found in the post-colonial experience because of cultural dislocation. Through Salman Rushdie's statement,[15] Shoene-Harwood suggests that the post-colonial self is "unpredictable" and falls out of the conventional frame of *Bildungsroman*. As Shoene-Harwood writes, "the self is cast adrift and denied the kind of reassuring, conclusive identity warranted by the seamless past/present/future continuum of cultural traditionality" (159). Shoene-Harwood, thus, argues that Syal's *Anita and Me* is an "anti-*Bildungroman*" (160) which breaks the conventional consistency and emancipates its protagonist from any single ethnicity or culture. In other words, Syal successfully facilitates "Meena's emancipation from—and beyond—any single ethnicity or culture" and she also enables Meena to escape from both the stereotypes of traditional South Asian culture and "the alienating influence of English *Bildung*" (Shoene-Harwood 167).

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[13] In fact, Dunphy indicates that he disagrees with Sheoene-Harwood's pessimistic view about Meena's doomed failure in questing for self. He claims that Meena is "too strong to be a victim" and he also approves of Meena's decision to embrace her Indian roots for identity toward the end of the novel (657-58).

[14] The characters in *Bildungsroman* usually remain consistently identical with whom they were at the outset and will be in the conclusion. Moreover, Schoene-Harwood quotes Paul Ricœr to talk about the consistency ". . . the end of the story is what equates the present with the past, the actual with the potential. The hero *is* who he *was*" (Shoene-Harwood 159; qtd. in Ricœr 186; italics in original).

[15] In Shoene-Harwood's words, Salman Rushdie symptomatically says that the displacement and disruptive impact from migration make the self unsettled and unpredictable. As Rushdie writes in his autobiographical essay "Imaginary Homeland," "I . . . who am no longer what I was and who by quitting Bombay never became what perhaps I was meant to be" (10).

According to Shoene-Harwood, the postcolonial migrants, outside of *Bildungsroman*, find themselves immersed in Bhabha's "Third Space of cultural hybridity" a topic also discussed by Shumona Dasgupta. Dasgupta, in "Interrogation the 'Fourth Space': Re-imaging 'Nation,' 'Culture' and 'Community' in South Asian Diasporic Fiction," explores South Asian diasporic experiences in *Life* from the aspect of globalization. She argues that, in terms of Bhabha's theory, hybrid identities occupy the "third space" and constitute a condition of cultural in-betweenness that provides a creative and productive site for exploring issues of identity. Nevertheless, she makes a corrective from a perspective of the South Asian female identity. She boldly raises the possibility of a "fourth space" to supplement Bhabha's "third space," which is defined by Dasgupta as a "masculinist conception" (117-18). Considering the overlap between race, gender, and class discourses in South Asian female identity, Dasgupta speaks of the concept of the "fourth space" as a "position occupied by black women in the metropole, marginalized by both the white mainstream, and the discourses of an indigenous patriarchy." She, moreover, states that the South Asian female identity "occupies the interstices of Britishness and traditional prescriptions of Asian femininity" (118). Inevitably, however, the South Asian female identity in the "fourth space" develops an inability to embrace either culture. In short, the South Asian female identity, according to Dasgupta's definition, embraces both culture but also becomes disloyal to both. It is trapped in the "in-between position" which actually provides it with a "liminal space" to re-think and create its unknown yet promising value.

Evidently, from Wilson to Dasgupta, the "in-between" subject of South Asian immigrants has been a main emphasis. When reviewing Syal's two novels, more or less, they focus on the in-between position and the hybridity possessed by Syal's protagonists. And they take Bhabha's "third space" to represent the liminal place

where the characters inhabit. Dasgupta's viewpoint about South Asian immigrants in Britain is particularly noteworthy not merely because she brings up the idea of "fourth space" to defy the third space but because she takes into account the double oppression of South Asian British women. From *Anita and Me* to *Life*, Syal effectively unmasks the conflict among race and gender discourses in South Asian experiences. Furthermore, through the four heroines from her two novels, she endows their in-betweenness with power as well as possibility and sketches a relatively comprehensive spectrum of South Asian British womanhood. However, the comments mentioned above mostly put emphasis on merely one of her works rather than view both novels as a whole. My thesis project, therefore, aims to put *Anita and Me* and *Life* together to examine how Meera Syal juxtaposes her heroines from different age groups of the second generation to articulate a new South Asian British voice—a non-white and vibrant female identity.

"The negotiation of identities is fundamental to South Asian women's writing in cross-cultural context," (1) said Yasmin Hussain in the introduction to *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity* to reveal how South Asian British women writers begin their creative works to represent their experiences and feelings.[16] Therefore, Syal makes Meena Kumar, the child protagonist, as a starting point to draw a blueprint of South Asian British womanhood. *Anita and Me* explores Meena's life and her dilemmas with conventional norms and the indigenous British society. It depicts how Meena transforms from immaturity to come with a more acute

[16] Yasmin Huassain, a lecturer in the Department of Social Policy and Sociology at the University of Leeds, has a particular interest in race and ethnicity. *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity*, her first book published in 2005, explores the issues of diaspora and identity. From a sociological perspective, Hussain analyzes the literary works of the new generation of South Asian British women writers and film directors such as Monica Ali, Meer Syal and Gurinder Chadha. In this book, she not only connects the contexts of the literary works with the experiences of the South Asian British women but also makes a further discussion about individual or group identities in South Asian community. It is noteworthy that she deftly brings out the issues about the interweaving relationships between gender and diaspora, as what Anne J. Kershen has praised in the preface: "[T]hrough Hussain's guidance, we are able to listen to the South Asian female voice."

awareness of her position and the ability to construct her own place (Hussain 111-13). When moving on to *Life*, Syal stages three adult women to illustrate South Asian women's "attempt to survive." Bitter but strong enough, they eventually re-assess their roles in family and in society. Although Syal's four characters seem to struggle with their conflict with family and society, they are actually faced with dissimilar phases of afflictions. Put together, *Anita and Me* and *Life* cut across social stratifications and involve female characters from different age groups and variant social backgrounds. And the two novels limn a spectrum of South Asian British womanhood—from a little girl to three adult women, from a small mining village to the metropolitan London. Through *Anita and Me* and *Life*, Syal shows her readers the South Asian British womanhood, which represents not only a rite of passage in an individual's development but also a collective identity formation. The South Asian British womanhood portrayed by Syal, in brief, is a transition to let her heroines "all learn to look beyond the self at a larger, newly emergent, regenerated British-Asian female community united across differentials of class, age, and sexuality" (Dasgupta 128).

The following chapters will move on to detailed analyses of *Anita and Me* and *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* respectively. The second chapter seeks to inspect the identity (re)formation of the second generation of South Asian immigrants by examining Syal's debut novel *Anita and Me*, the novel of childhood. Meena Kumar's eagerness to grow up and her friendship with Anita Rutter profoundly present the struggle of South Asian British youth caught between "the world's attitude towards her and her own definition of her role in life" (Hussain 111). My primary concern about *Anita and Me* is to focus on the in-between position occupied by Meena's hybrid identities. In fact, Meera Syal purposely shapes Meena as a character caught "in-between" no matter in her living place, age, or ethnicity. Therefore, Meena's

in-betweenness provides a productive and creative site for Syal to constitute the South Asian British womanhood which begins with Meena's initiation to experience a conflict of parental expectations, personal interests, peer attitudes and the reality of social environments around her. Through Meena's progression toward maturity, the power of the in-bewteenness is explored. And the passage of awakening also endows Meena with "a full complement of self-awareness, wit and intelligence" (Hussain 129) to help her realize her identity, sexuality, and responsibility at last. Last but not the least, by scrutinizing Meena's personal development, we will find that Meena has free choice to decide her future. Rather than being constraint to comply with the route decided by the conventional norms, she follows individual will and dominates her own future. Admittedly, the struggle between individual will and familial duties is a collective experience for every South Asians. And it will be amplified in Syal's second novel *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee.*

When referring to Syal's use of a child as the main character, Hussain claims that a child narrator has its limitation because of its naïve viewpoint, which may make the prose "stumbling and inelegant" (128-29). On the contrary, Campbell-Hall praises that "[t]he imagined space of second-generations childhood innocence provides a safe point of reference from which to examine popular conceptions of cultural hybridity" (291). He believes that using a child narrator as a literary device is able to present the fluctuation between childhood innocence and adult knowledge. Thus, Syal's second novel *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* would be featured in the third chapter. This chapter endeavors to explore how Syal illustrates the tremendous changes faced by the three London women of South Asian descent in terms of relationships and belief systems. Concerning the double oppression of South Asian women in Britain, I shall scrutinize a more complicated and conflicting situation inhabited by female adults of this generation. Still, Syal's three heroines are positioned between free choice and

determined fate as what have occurred to Meena. But the three are in a knotty condition because their lives are more complex than a little girl's. Aside from friendship, the three women have to deal with issues of migration, shifting identities, cultural hybridities, as well as fluid and fractured relationships with home and marriage. Therefore, in order to respond to the "drawbacks" raised by Hussain, I shall analyze the three heroines to exemplify how Syal uses the second novel as a sequel to represent the difficulties confronted by South Asian women. By examining *Life*, this chapter is going to scrutinize how the female characters leave the roles prescribed for them and redefine themselves. Through a journey from self-awareness to self-development, it can be observed that how the three South Asian adult women recognize their weaknesses, break through obstacles and finally recognize the strength in their selfhood. Most importantly, it is going to see how Syal sketches her ideal and belief through the South Asian British women.

The final chapter moves to make a brief conclusion on Syal's attempt to present South Asian women through different modes of lives and conflicts experienced by her heroines. In fact, from *Anita and Me* to *Life*, it can be found that Syal has bore an optimistic attitude toward the condition of South Asian women in Britain. It is apparent that, although she at first distributes the characters with the circumstances with conflicts and dilemmas, she tends to lead them to a journey toward internal self-understanding and awakening. Meena, Tania, Sunita, and Chila, who are from different age groups and backgrounds, fully characterize the bonds and relationships shared by the South Asian women, particularly the second generations in British society. All of them are aware of their in-between position, and they also struggle with it. Nevertheless, they eventually realize the power of their in-betweenness and turn to embrace it. By recognizing their weaknesses and reversing their "doubly disempowered position" (Hussain 120), they re-invent their own lives which are

determined neither by parents nor by fate. From uncertainty, self-doubt, to final resolution toward dilemmas in life, the transition of the four female characters represents for us a relatively comprehensive spectrum of the South Asian British womanhood. It reveals that they all look beyond the limitations set by the external environments, and proves to people a will to survive, which is indeed believed by Syal. Meera Syal's ambition to pen her life into books and to employ her advantages profoundly attests to what Rushdie says "Literature is self-validating" (14). And the South Asian British womanhood she depicts, more or less, deftly responds to the question: "What does it mean to be 'Indian' outside India?" (Rushdie 17).

Chapter Two

Knowing and (Re)figuring the In-betweenness in Self

> [T]he 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.
>
> — Meena Kumar, *Anita and Me*

Anita and Me is based on the ambivalence that the children of immigration have confronted with.[17] In the epigraph excerpted from the opening of *Anita and Me*, Meera Syal clearly states the in-betweenness in Meena Kumar's voice. The statement, "the gap between what is said and what is thought, what is stated and what is implied" clearly indicates Meena's state of uncertainty, or, a grey area. Growing up in a white British neighborhood and being a daughter of the only South Asian family in the village, Meena is one of the children of immigration who always struggles to fit into the British community. She is longing to grow up and leave the South Asian

[17] The term "children of immigration" is borrowed from Carola and Marcel M. Suárez-Orozco's *Children of Immigration*, published by the Harvard University Press in 2001. They make a clear definition of "immigrant children" and "children of immigration": the term "immigrant children" is strictly confined to those foreign born children who have migrated but not the second generation born in the host country, "children of immigration," on the other hand, represent either the foreign born children or those who are born in the host country. It should be noted that the term "children of immigration" in this thesis specifically denotes the children of South Asian descent being born in Britain.

Carola and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, co-directors of the Harvard Immigration Project, have spent over two decades studying immigration. They collect all their researches and experiences to publish *Children of Immigration*, which was first named *The Developing Child*, to provide an overview on the lives of immigrant children in America, including both U.S. born and foreign born children. They provide the readers a penetrative insight into the problem and the living condition that immigrant children and the children of immigration confront in America. Their focus upon the conflicts that children face in the relationship with parents or with peer groups and the difficulties in the process of acculturation accords with Meena's struggle in her childhood.

community for a life without any circumscription. In the humorous and poignant portrait of Meena's childhood and early adolescence, Syal displays the struggle of South Asian British youth and deals with the identity (re)formation of the second generations of South Asian immigrants. As well, as the story proceeds, it will be found that the little heroine Meena goes through not only the formation of identity but also the transition from childhood into young adulthood. Inspired by her childhood experience, *Anita and Me* can be seen as Syal's semi-autobiographical novel. It was first published in 1996 and shortlisted for Guardian fiction prize. It won The Betty Trask Award,[18] and was later made into a film of the same title in 2002, in which Syal was casted as aunt Shaila. *Anita and Me* follows the story of Meena Kumar, a nine-year-old British girl of Punjabi descent, and her life with her parents in Tollington, a fictional mining village in Midland of the early 1970s. Meena, as a normal young girl by today's standard, is forever dreaming of an unrealistic life. She is a figure caught in-between two distinct cultures—that of the extended Indian family and the white British neighborhood. On one hand, Meena's parents have great expectations for her to pass the eleven-plus exams since they strongly believe that education is the only way to obtain a better future. On the other hand, they hope that Meena is able to inherit the traditional Indian culture and demonstrate proper behaviors. Meena knows there is a binding connection with family, even with her Indian roots; yet, the contradictions between her immigrant parents and her life in the white neighborhood cause her a sense of doubly estrangement.

Basically, *Anita and Me* shows the reader that immigration is a process with a hard time for both immigrant parents and their children. The first-generation

[18] The Betty Trask Award has been endowed with the bequest left by the late Betty Trask to the Society of Authors. Since 1983, the prizes have been eligible for first novels written by authors under the age of 35. And the prizes are especially awarded to those who reside in current or former Commonwealth nations. This award is rather unconventional in that it can be distributed to published or unpublished work. For more details about the award and the past winners, please see http://www.societyofauthors.org/betty-trask-past-winners.

immigrants, such as Meena's parents, start their journeys to the new home with hope. Even though their ethnicity limit their opportunities, they still believe that a better future for children would make their sacrifices worthwhile (Suárez-Orozco 22-23). In the very beginning of *Anita and Me*, through Meena's narration, Syal deftly portrays how "economic immigrants" (Nasta 23) left their Motherland for "luck and promised gold" (*AM* 31):

> I do not have many memories of my very early childhood, apart from the obvious ones, of course. You know, my windswept, bewildered parents in their dusty Indian village garb standing in the open doorway of a 747, blinking back tears of gratitude and heartbreak as the fog cleared to reveal the sign they had been waiting for, dreaming of, the sign planted in tarmac and emblazoned in triumphant hues of red, blue and white, the sign that said simply, WELCOME TO BRITAIN. (9)

Although it is Meena's imagined "alternative history" (10), it still clearly brings out most parents' motivation in immigration: they leave their Motherland, India, for the affluent Britain because of supposed brilliant prospects. Yet, born and raised in the new country, their offspring have developed different understandings about life, about culture, even about their identities. These different perceptions gradually distance children from their immigrant parents and extend the gap between the two generations. Hence the Kumar's family unity is threatened by the unexpected generation gap.

As Carola and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco state in *Children of Immigration*, "although many immigrant parents are motivated by a desire for a better future for their children, the very process of immigration tends to undermine parental authority and family cohesion" (6). Apparently, the exertion of immigration becomes a "Faustian bargain" (Suárez-Orozco 79). Although, on the one hand, it may bring the

family some advantages such as an ampler life or an auspicious future; on the other hand, it inevitably will destabilize the immigrants' family unity. Children of immigration, like Meena, have been educated at the school and influenced by the mainstream culture. Therefore, the media of the host culture, such as television, movies, or even the habits of their peers, all serve as new cultural models and possible lifestyles for them to follow. Nevertheless, these "new" (or more "Western") ways of life most likely contradicts their parents' expectations. Accordingly, the disagreement between Meena's identification with the host culture and her parents' cultural belief systems causes tensions in the familial relationships. Oftentimes Meena finds herself vacillating between parental tradition and the host culture.

As illustrated above, Meena in fact is in such an ambivalent condition. She stands at the fault line between her South Asian identity and her British identification. Although she longs to speak Tollington-accented English and to look as chic as other kids in her community, she cannot cover her "visibly racialized body" (Neti 99). As one of the second generations of immigrants, Meena cannot completely identify herself with South Asian culture. Instead of acquainting herself with her connection with India, she looks for role model from the white neighborhood she lives in. From the perspective of Meena, we can get the pictures of social dislocations, cultural alienations, and identity confusions that pervade the second generations of immigrants. Attempting to explore the issues of racial awareness, this chapter aims to examine how Meera Syal, being as a second-generation South Asian British writer, directs her protagonist Meena to look for identity and belongings in either British society or South Asian community. This chapter argues that, in the process of re-identifying herself and acknowledging her connection with her South Asian ethnicity, Meena gradually modifies her notions about the South Asian culture; meanwhile, she reverses her initial uncertainty and confusion for the benefit of her

in-btweenness. In addition to realizing the power of her innate in-betweenness, Meena also makes use of it to develop a "transcultural identity" (Suárez-Orozco 113) that helps her maintain affective ties with South Asian culture and manage to survive in British mainstream culture at the same time. In the end, it reaches a conclusion that she must let go of the performance of whiteness to which she has consecrated her childhood and can finally develop a more independent identity with a "dual—even if now less fixed—perspectives of being both Indian and English" (Neti 116). She at last learns how to privilege her "duality" (Neti 115) rather than subsumes her performance into a single identification.

For such a second-generation child of immigrants like Meena, parental expectations and conventional norms are not of primary importance. More often than not, parental expectations and prohibitions create barriers between her and her parents. She actually longs to belong, to be appreciated by peers of her same age. Meanwhile, she is gradually aware of those "appropriate behaviors" at home will only make her appear odd and alien in public. Meena's position, stuck in between the white neighborhood and her Punjab family, makes her feel awkward. In the village, she does not belong to any group or gang. She feels relieved when her seventh birthday party is canceled because she does not have to face the fact that she has no one to invite. As she describes her embarrassing situation, "I was stuck in between the various gangs, too young for Anita's consideration, too old to hang around the cloud of toddlers that would settle on me like a rash every time I set foot outside my front door" (*AM* 25). But, back at home, she cannot find her position either, especially when her parents have secret conversations in Punjabi. Those secret discussions, Meena realizes, are mostly about her misbehaviors or about the past that only belongs to her parents and their friends. When Meena's elders get together using their familiar language and sharing their communal memories or sorrows, she feels suffocated and

is literally chocked by the affection shared by the grownups. There is an episode in the fiction that sarcastically represents her smothering condition:

> . . . Mummy and papa were talking again, soft whispers, sss sss sss, my mother's bracelets jingled as she seemed to wipe something from her face. This was my birthday and they were leaving me out again. I squeezed my hot dog and suddenly the sausage shot into my mouth and lodged firmly in my windpipe. I was too shocked to move, my fingers curled uselessly into my fists. They were still talking, engrossed . . . . (27)

Almost choked to death, Meena is frightened and senses that life is vulnerable. Syal here purposely uses the scene of suffocation to epitomize Meena's occasional alienation within her family. Syal humorously utilize onomatopoeic "sss sss sss" to portray Meena's unfamiliarity with her parents' conversation in Punjabi. The smothery feeling is specifically represented by the accident of being chocked.

After the near-death experience, Meena begins to recount the interaction with her parents and within the South Asian community. In Meena's memory, her parents rarely invite neighbors to their place except those pretend uncles and aunties; as she recalls, "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" (*AM* 29). The "invasion" that Meena uses to describe the frequent visits paid by non-blood relatives more or less underlines her alienation in the South Asian community. For her parents, in order to bridge themselves to their homeland India, they strive to keep "authentic" Indian cultures and customs such as clothes, language-using, or meals in daily life. Moreover, they rely on those non-blood related friends to comfort their nostalgia, to create a little India as a space where they can store their communal and shared histories by celebrating festivals and feasting together. It is a practice that makes them

feel safe and wanted. As Meena puts it, “I knew how intensely my parents valued these people they so readily renamed as family, faced with the loss of their own blood relations” (31). But, Meena begins to feel excluded when non-blood relatives and their shared memories intrude into her life and leave her no space. She feels blocked out and proclaims that: “[G]radually, I got bored, and then jealous of this past that excluded me” (36). Especially when the grownups get together to share the past memories and their sorrow, they circle a corner with no place for Meena. Meena says, “During these *ghazals*, my elders became strangers to me . . . . There was no point in my being there; when I looked at my elders, in these moments, they were all far, far away” (72). The g*hazal* may generally be understood as a poetic form in which people express the pain of separation and loss. It is mainly involved in singers’ sadness, love, longing and questions for life. In the little India, which Meena’s parents and their friends build up, *ghazals* seem to play a role of soothing their dense melancholy and desperation derived from the turmoil of Partition. Obviously, for the elders, either the little India or the *ghazal* entails a “communal policing” (*AM* 31) to alleviate the anxiety within homelessness as well as displacement.

When analyzing Meena, Yasmin Hussain indicates that “Meena’s life is lived in two parallel worlds, which differ from each other in terms of culture, religion and her own experience: that of the surrounding indigenous British society and that of the family home” (113). As a matter of fact, Meena’s description of their “Front Garden dilemma” (*AM* 33) highlights the differences between the two worlds. The bare garden, without ornamental wells or gnomes but spread with her mother’s herbs and spice plants, remarkably separates Meena’s life into two spaces. Inside the garden, lays the South Asian family that offers her guidance but at the same time pressures her with the family’s expectations on her school and future achievement. It is exactly a space that surrounds Meena with conventional values. On the other side, the white

neighborhood and the peer groups open a world of recreation and Western culture that Meena always aspires to try out. Meena keeps vacillating between the two worlds in her childhood. However, the hot dog moment and her feeling of being excluded by her family little by little seem to drive Meena to get closer to the surrounding British society. Making friend with Anita Rutter and being part of Rutter's gang, which includes Fat Sally and Sherrie, stand for Meena's first step into the "genuine" British world.

The title character Anita, blonde, confident and boisterous, is a few years senior to Meena. She is a completely opposite figure of a well-behaved girl in the South Asian standards. Whilst Meena's parents regard Anita as a bad company of their daughter, the fact is that Meena needs Anita and decides to befriend her because Anita represents an ideal other that she lusts for, or even yearns to become. Graeme Dunphy claims that "[i]t would be too simple to say that Anita is a bad influence on Meena, for Meena clearly wants this influence. Rather, Meena projects fantasies and frustrations onto Anita, using her to overcome her own insecurities" (642). The friendship between Meena and Anita indeed provides Meena an alternative in her seeking for belonging. In Meena's eyes, to befriend Anita is to book herself a bold adventure for future. Hence, Meena embarks on her big adventure on the first day of summer holidays. On that day, they have their first official conversation. Anita shows Meena how butterfly eggs roll up in a leaf to hide, then she strips all the leaves off a branch and flicks it at Meena. "It stung but I did not pull my legs back. I knew this was a test," said Meena (*AM* 39). As a ritual, Meena procures sweets to Anita and feels privileged to be in Anita's company. The butterfly eggs are forced to leave the branch that they are used to stick to; similarly, Meena leaves her South Asian obligations behind and heads for an uncertain adventure.

Being Anita's new friend, at first, Meena endeavors to please those girls. She

sneaks to the fairground with Anita and intends to impress Anita with her "authentic Yard accent" (*AM* 122). Furthermore, coerced by Anita, Meena pockets money from Mr. Ormerod's shop and further incriminates Baby and Pinky of the stealing. She does all she could to retain her role in "Wenches Brigade" and to strengthen her relationship with Anita (138). The stealing incident on Meena's birthday verifies that Meena officially becomes a member of Anita's group. In a way, it also symbolizes Meena's transition from a girl into a "real Wench," since Meena gains her "Wench Wings" on her birthday and earns the invitation, also a permission, to join the leadership with Anita (156). It is not only an honor to become Anita's joint-leader but also a compensation for her loss of position in the South Asian community because of the arrival of baby brother Sunil, who engages his parents' full attention. For Meena, it is significant and precious to get recognition from Anita. Meena's friendship with Anita surely balances her lack of attention at home; such a friendship also makes her feel complete and sets her free. The alliance with Anita and the gang asserts Meena's individuality, which is totally distinct from the image of being a sweet and polite girl of South Asian descent, as represented by Pinky and Baby. Obviously, the more Meena is compelled toward the white community, the more distant she becomes with her family and her ethnicity. The peer group, therefore, dominates Meena's life and her thinking—just like what she tellingly declares, "My life was outside the house, with Anita, my passport to acceptance" (148).

Meena endeavors to ascertain her belonging through her friendship with Anita. Yet, the more Meena gets familiar with the white neighborhood, the more she is disappointed. When she has further contact with the people she admires, she gets apprehensive of racialized tensions and hostility within the neighborhood, which makes her aware that she is still unable to find a sense of belonging within the white society. Concerning Meena's awareness and transition, Hussain admits that

cultivating friendship with Anita indeed keeps Meena in contact with the white culture, but she also asserts that Meena will finally finds that her individuality is misguided because of her idolization of Anita. As Hussain notes,

> In befriending Anita, Meena becomes engaged in a wide variety of new social contexts, which provide conflicting demands and expectations. Meena begins to experience a conflict of parental ideas, personal interests, peer attitudes and the reality of her social environment. (113-14)

Her fantasy world now becomes reality that forces her to recognize the conflicting situation she is in. She observes that insidious racism lurking in people's attitude is emblematic of the fissures between the neighborhood and her. Simultaneously, racist speeches or behaviors in the living place inspire her to side with her ethnic group.

Directly or not, racial discrimination or prejudice always comes across to Meena either in the neighborhood or at the school. In a history class, one of Meena's classmates answers that the village they live is called "Black Country" mainly because there are so many "darkies" (*AM* 22). Meena feels humiliated and hence kicks the boy. The teacher punishes Meena rather than blames the boy for his inappropriate speech. It is noteworthy that Meena recalls what has happened in the history class in a very indifferent way. Meena at first is irritated because of the boy's comment on her skin color. At the time, she has not noticed that the implication of the boy's remark is actually discrimination against her ethnicity. What really invokes her attention is a racial sideswipe on the way to the *gurdwara*, a Sikh temple. Meena remembers that it is the incident that her mother cannot stop the car from sliding down from the hill. When Meena asks an old lady to reverse her car a bit further, the old lady mutters: "Bloody stupid wog. Stupid woggy wog. Stupid" (97). While intending to tell her father about the incident, she recalls the moment:

> I suddenly realized that what had happened to me must have happened to

> papa countless times, but not once had he ever shared his upset with me. He must have known it would have made me feel as I felt right now, hurt, angry, confused, and horribly powerless because this kind of hatred could not be explained. (98)

It may be Meena's first time to sense that she in fact is forever an outsider to the neighborhood where she had regarded herself as an insider (Wilson 112).

Meanwhile, Meena constantly senses that there is no reciprocal respect in her friendship with Anita. Regarding Anita as the only one who is able to understand her loneliness and conflict, Meena worships everything of Anita. Nevertheless, from time to time, she has to face being snubbed and disrespected in the relationship. What bothers Meena the most is the frosty attitude of Deirdre, Anita's mother. Meena believes that Deirdre does not welcome her from the way Deirdre inspects her. Deirdre, intentionally or not, names their fluffy dog Nigger, which discomforts Meena somehow. Meena is confused about why Anita and her family cannot treat her wholeheartedly. In their companionship, there seems to be an everlasting gap, which is so hard to bridge across and such a connection can crumble easily as well. As expected, they almost split after the outburst of Sam Lowbridge's racist speech at the Spring Fete. Sam is a bad boy around the yard, and he is the one whom Meena adores as well. During the Spring Fete, Sam stands against the construction of motorway and spits out: "This is our patch. Not Some wogs' handout" (*AM* 193). Insulted and betrayed, Meena suddenly realizes she has never belonged to the white neighborhood. Those who she has been so intimate with are now turned into someone unrecognizable. In particular, Anita disappoints Meena when Anita worships Sam rather than despises him for his radical statement. Meena ultimately realizes that Anita has never been considerate of Meena's condition. Anita sees Meena as one of her followers instead of her equal. The inequality within their relations makes the

friendship unstable, which might probably tumble down anytime. Meena discovers that most of them, including Fat Sally and Sherrie, submit to Anita's leadership because they are afraid of being outsiders. Meena remarks that,

> I had seen how in an instant, those you called friends could suddenly become tormentors, sniffing out a weakness or a difference, turning their own fear of ostracism into a weapon with which they could beat the victim away, afraid that being an outsider, an individual even, was somehow infectious. (142)

What Meena manifests is a communal fear, fear of being different, being weak, and being excluded. It is also why Meena is so astonished when she confronts the Spring Fete incident. Fearing being outcast in the community, hardly any of the inhabitants come forward to censure Sam's radical speaking. They want to retain their rights and to protect their neighborhood, and therefore choose to acquiesce in unfairness and discrimination. Even though the boy's thoughtless speech in the history class as well as the old lady's insolent response surely affect her, Meena still can stand and live with it. But, this time, the discrimination directly comes from the people whom she is so familiar with. Meena eventually learns that how quickly people whom she regards as friends can turn into so hostile when irrational belief spreads.

After the Spring Fete, Meena decides to dissociate herself from the gang. Expectably, the detachment from the friendship, following the exclusion, pushes Meena fall back to an uncertain circumstance again. Interestingly, although she seems retrograding to an insecure condition and again losing her sense of belonging, she does not seem fearful or anxious like before. For her, it is her way to maintain her dignity and defend her South Asian ethnicity. In the meanwhile she gradually becomes aware that her idolization of Anita does not provide much help in developing her identity. She ultimately apprehends her eagerness to belong would

mislead her into a false concept of self easily. At the moment, she gains some inspiration from Nanima, her non-English-speaking grandmother visiting from India. Following the Spring Fete event, Nanima's arrival undoubtedly proves to be a turning point of Meena's awakening. In a sense, Nanima not only epitomizes the past of Meena's parents in India but also represents the genuine South Asian culture with which Meena has never connected directly. Nanima's appearance directly invokes Meena's curiosity about her ethnicity. She replaces Anita as a mentor to lead Meena into the next stage of transition journey—coming to be aware of the intrinsic worth of being as an in-between subject.

There is no doubt that Nanima's visit brings about Meena's self-awareness. She begins to explore her inherent in-betweenness. Syal deliberately interweaves the settings of *Anita and Me*, including characters and backgrounds, with the tinge of in-betweenness to manifest the in-between feature of Meena. First of all, the Kumars is the only Punjab family in Tollington—the former mining village in Midland. The neighborhood, according to Meena's depiction, has been in a poor condition since the mine suddenly shut down. Whilst a nearby New Town is built up and provides the inhabitants a place to shop and to keep contact with civilization (*AM 19*), it highlights the desolation of Tollington instead. Located in between the deserted mine and the New Town, Tollington has been suspended from progression for many years. Residents gradually move out, but the Kumars still choose to move in because the fields in Tollington remind Meena's mother of her hometown in Punjab. Meena hence starts her in-between life in Tollington, whose neighborhood is in a state of suspension.

As well, the Big House, a mysterious manor on the outskirt of Tollington, echoes its in-betweenness throughout Meena's childhood. Meena describes the Big House as a spooky yet mystical place that enchants her all the time. It is positioned in between

Meena's house and the fairground. The Big House, just like the garden of Meena's house, plays a role of a watershed that divides Meena's worlds into two: one is her house retaining the South Asian standards and customs, and the other is the fairground which represents the white community. At first, in Meena's perspective, home leaves her no space and makes her feel ignored oftentimes. So she favors the unstrained happiness the fairground features. Gradually she notices that the fairground contains a kind of craziness which is too excessive for her to cope with. Seemingly, only the secret and secluded Big House can bring her calm and serenity. The Big House, in some ways, embodies Meena's in-betweenness. On one hand, its isolation and uncertainty surely disturb her; but on the other hand, its bottomless mystery also attracts her at the same time. In other words, the Big House represents an "interstitial passage" (Bhabha 5) that not only connects the two meaningful spaces for Meena but also opens up a possibility for her to combine her binary identifications. When going further and observing Meena's in-betweenness and her relation with the Big House, it will be found that the power in Meena's in-betweenness exactly responds to Homi K. Bhabha's "liminality."

Bhabha brings up the concept of in-betweenness, or as what he calls "liminality," from Renée Green's question about binary logic. Green, as an African American art historian, queries about unity and solidarity in the social community from an "interstitial perspective" (5). In proposing Green's stairwell, which connects the attic and boiler room, Bhabha shows how a liminal space illustrates an in-betweenness with "the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white" (4-5). To be more specific, Green's words reveal her intention to break the binary divisions,

> I used architecture literally as a reference, using the attic, the boiler room, and the stairwell to make associations between certain binary divisions such

> as higher and lower and heaven and hell. The stairwell became a liminal space, a pathway between the upper and lower areas, each of which was annotated with plaques referring to blackness and whiteness. (qtd. in Bhabha 5)[19]

Without doubt, both Bhabha and Green are against dichotomy. They also infer that there is an interstitial passage between arbitrary designations, such as upper and lower, black and white. Most importantly, they both attest that the interstitial passage becomes a space in which differences are negotiated and interacted. Bhabha makes it clear that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without any assumed or imposed hierarchy" (5). It is of importance to note that Meena is immersed in the so-called interstitial passage in between her South Asian ethnicity and her white identification. To all appearances, her in-between position blurs the border between home and outside world. Indeed, for Bhabha, the in-between (or interstitial) passage is "a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience" (8). But he also elaborates that "[i]n that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (13). With Bhabha's explanation, one can therefore understand that Meena's feeling of exclusion and displacement, to a large extent, is brought by her precarious position between the host culture of Britain and the origin of India. It appears that she belongs to neither side and also gets stalled in a predicament of being outcast, first from her South Asian family, then from the white community.

Actually, Meena belongs to both sides and is situated in an in-between passage

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[19] Bhabha excerpted this paragraph from Green's conversation with Donna Harkavy, the Curator of Contemporary Art at Worcester Art Museum, in which they discussed the stairwell installation.

which allows her to negotiate the differences from two distinct cultures to develop bicultural advantage. In addition, she is going through a process of translation which she has not noticed. In the process of self-discovery, she acknowledges her in-betweenness and further indentifies herself with her in-between features that is feasible to negotiate the past and the present, the private and the public. Notably, it is Nanima's presence that catalyzes the formation of Meena's self-reconfiguration. Inspired by Nanima, Meena commences to retrace her place of origin. About the conversion in Meena's attitude toward her South Asian ethnicity, Janet Wilson argues that Meena acquire a "homing desire" (Brah 193) to restore her relationship with the South Asian community. When Meena, Meena's mother and Nanima get together for a photograph, Meena discovers that the blood relationship is re-connected like "Russian dolls" and she recognizes that hardly can her connection with South Asian descent be completely cut off (*AM* 202). What is more significant is that Nanima not only prompts Meena's curiosity about the culture of origin but also invokes nostalgia of the grownups. Roger Bromley argues that after Sam's behavior at the fete Meena realizes that she does not live under the same sky as other people do; moreover, she even comes to recognize herself as a minority—"an ethnicised other" (147). Bromley further implies that though Nanima's visit reminds Meena of her displacement, the agency of Nanima in fact "contextualizes Meena's estrangement [and] produces [her] a denser self, both rerooted and rerouted" (147). Indeed, Meena's feeling of being displaced is reinforced since Nanima's arrival, yet it is a little bit different from her former experiences. According to Meena's "grumbles," the coming of Nanima accompanies Punjabi songs, laughter and curry smells spreading over her house. The pretend aunties and uncles visit the Kumars almost every day. For those aunties and uncles, Nanima brings them the "Home" that they have always dreamed about. It is Meena's first time to see those elders guffaw and cheer so expansively in public.

Their delight influences Meena somehow. She wants to complain about their excessive happiness but strangely finds that she is attracted to the unfamiliar scene where "[her] two worlds had collided and mingled so easily" (*AM* 204). Namely, Nanima's arrival conjures Meena's homing desire "to learn about her place of origin through a process of conceptualization and translation" (Wilson 112).

According to Wilson, after experiencing uncertainty, alienation, and conflict, Meena realizes that she needs to reconcile her ambiguous position and adjust herself to self-reconstruct an in-between identity which blends the culture of origin and the culture of re-location (112-13). Bromley explicates further on Meena's changing racial awareness:

> As [Meena] comes under pressure from what slowly unfolds as a racist community, the more she needs to learn of the history, politics and languages of her parents' India, not as a place to retreat to, but as a cultural space to start out from in order to contest the fixed, racialised identity inscribed in her localized experience in the rural West Midlands. (143)

Meena is gradually tired of the ignorance, overtly aggressive manner, or even the apathetic silence in the neighborhood. Accordingly, she returns to embrace and to seek refuge within the family. With the company of Nanima, Meena initiates the exploration of her inherent South Asian ethnicity, and she also begins to re-discover the different phases of India. One night, when Nanima lies beside Meena and mumbles something about India, Meena is surprised that she seems to understand every single word that Nanima speaks in Punjabi. An intimate connection between Meena and India appears to take shape.

Not only for Meena but also for the Kumar family, Nanima is a powerful support both physically and mentally. Meena's self-discovery is initiated when Nanima settles a comfortable routine for them. There is an activity called "Entertaining Sunil" in the

new routine, and Meena describes it as this: “Nanima had applied some ancient witchery to finally cut the umbilical cord that was slowly strangling both him and us, Sunil was now anybody’s, especially mine” (208). Nanima not merely cuts off Sunil’s dependence on his mother but meaningfully bridges the distance between Meena and the family. There is a subtle change in Meena when she speaks out “mine.” In particular, she becomes more responsible for her family when she is in charge of Nanima and Sunil. She speaks in a protective tone while narrating what has happened on the way to Mr. Ormerod’s shop with Nanima and Sunil. Apparently, Meena’s connection with family has turned to be inseparable. As Meena puts it:

> . . . for the first time I desperately wanted to visit India and claim some of this magic as mine.
>
> It was all falling into place now, why I felt this continual compulsion to fabricate, this ever-present desire to be someone else in some other place far from Tollington. Before Nanima arrived, this urge to reinvent myself, I could now see, was driven purely by shame, the shame I felt when we ‘did’ India at school . . . . (*AM* 211)

The gradual intimacy with her South Asian cultural heritage, as represented by Nanima, strengthens Meena’s self-understanding and encourages her to utilize her in-betweenness so as to construct an identity that combines both cultures in her life.

After becoming familiar with India through Nanima’s help, Meena gains growing awareness of the Indian part of herself; from this point on, she learns to remake an identity that embraces both cultures—the culture of her racial origin and British one. About remaking identities, Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco reflect that creating “transcultural identities” will be more adaptive than other ways of

shaping identities.[20] They additionally explain that, in order to construct identities that can let them thrive in different settings such as homes, schools, or peer groups, the major job of children of immigration is to do "the crafting of bicultural identities [to] fuse aspects of both cultures—the parental tradition and the new culture—in a process of transculturation that blends two systems that are at once their own and foreign" (112-13). And they are convinced that children can make higher achievement if they can construct bicultural competencies and turn them into as an integral part of their sense of self. Likewise, Meena has been on the margins of two cultures; paradoxically, she never truly belongs to either side. Therefore, from the very beginning of the fiction, it can be seen that she keeps shuttling through the interstitial passage between two cultures. However, through a process of acculturation, Meena eventually recognizes her in-betweenness as advantageous, which can "transform the 'old' ethnic culture and the 'new' majority culture in creative ways" (Suárez-Orozco 118). Although using different terms, this trancultural identity is exactly the in-between identity that Meena is trying to develop. However, Meena's in-between identity is more fluid and powerful that can let her "stand above and apart from both [cultures], [and] allow her to observe both the English and the Indians from a distanced perspective" (Dunphy 650). Getting rid of earlier sense of incompleteness, Meena finally achieves a new understanding about her in-between position which is so powerful that can make her feel strong enough to survive whatever she chooses to

[20] In terms of children's identities and adjustment in immigration, Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco address three styles of adaptation. Apart from "transcultural identities," there are still two other styles: "ethnic flight" and "adversarial identities." Firstly, "ethnic flight" categorizes those who strongly identify with the mainstream culture. The children of "ethnic flight" mimic and embrace total assimilation and identification of the dominant culture to move away from the family and the ethnic group. Whilst ethnic flight is a form of adaptation to help the children fit in the social standards, yet it situates them in a condition of losing the language and culture of origin. At the opposite end of the style of "ethnic flight," some children of immigration develop adversarial identities to stand against the mainstream culture. The children of the type of "adversarial identities" refuse any kind of cultural assimilation and also believe that embracing the dominant culture is equated with giving up the ethnic identity. They are at risk of lacking opportunities and being marginalized. Subsequently, they would be easily drawn to gang ethos which provides them a sense of belonging, support and warmth.

be: “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” (*AM* 303).

In fact, with Nanima as her model, Meena learns to re-locate herself in the white community and thus becomes more comfortable while walking in the neighborhood. With a series of adjustments and recognitions, she feels that she gets to be strong enough to confront Anita and Sam. Meena may have seen Anita as her passport to acceptance and to non-ethnic whiteness; nevertheless, she later becomes aware that Anita is not as tough like as she appears to be. Only after a series of incidents and self-reconfiguration can Meena recognize that she would “no longer be Anita’s shadow but her equal” (237). Different but closely related, both of them are in need of each other in the growing-up process. As Meena says, “She needed me maybe more than I needed her. There is a fine line between love and pity and I had just stepped over it” (242). What Meena reveals is her growth in their friendship. When Meena eventually realizes that Anita is as helpless and uncertain as she is, she tries to fix up their relationship and invites her to have dinner with them. But Meena quickly understands that there is no possibility in this friendship when Anita flaunting how Sam and her beat up the bank manager, who is also from Punjab. It is the first time that Meena senses that Anita and Sam are both in self-degradation, which is like the abandoned Tollington—immobilized and hopeless.

As suggested by Bromley, Anita is in fact never an entrance for Meena but a “cul-de-sac” and she is destined to be “part of a thwarted and blunted class fraction, powerless, excluded and marginalised” (146). Sam, as well, is a marginalized and pathetic figure. Obviously, Sam and Anita are confined to a limited future. They are trapped in this declined village. Meena relatively develops a fluid identity which makes her become more mobilized than Sam and Anita. She can “try on roles, mimic

voices" (Bromley 146) to cross boundaries. Especially after the brutal attack on the bank manager, she is conscious of the corruption either in Tollington or among those who she once saw as friends. Feeling irritated by Anita's ignorance and disappointed about their failed friendship, Meena decides to change. She mounts Sherrie's pony and rushes past Anita. In an almost suicidal moment, she falls and breaks a leg. Meena always expects something to happen. And now she realizes that what she always expects is a chance to have change. In this regard, Meena breaks not only her leg but also her relations with Anita and Sam:

> Anita and I had never meant for each other: Sam and Anita, Anita and Sam, it sounded as natural as breathing. And me and the Bank Manager, we both lay in hospital beds whilst the boots and the heels rode the highways of Tollington together, turning us into drunken, boastful anecdotes. (282)

When Meena pairs Anita with Sam and the Bank Manager with herself, she actually demonstrates her recognition that Anita and she are never suitable for each other. Rather than picks a future to fool around with Anita and Sam, Meena chooses to come around to her South Asian ethnicity. Showing disdain about the wicked couple's drunken future, Meena seem completely awakening from the "Anita myth" (Schoene-Harwood 163). She further eradicates Anita's from her life bit by bit:

> I could gradually erase her like a child's pencil drawing, begin with the top of her head and work my way down . . . by the end of four months, I calculated, she would be nothing but a smudge, a faint outline caused by an inexperienced, un-coordinated hand. (*AM* 282)

Intriguingly, in reverse proportion of Meena's gradual emancipation from the dominant relations, Sam and Anita's future becomes blurred and gloomy, which is similar to the continued stagnation of Tollington. Anita and Sam's immobility, according to Bromley, infers that "the beached white males and females of a deskilled

working class, whose ‘whiteness’ is their only vestigial link with the dominant relations of power” (148). Therefore, uncoupled from Anita and the locals, Meena returns to an outsider status and observes the decline of Tollington. As what Bromley points out, the immobility, even corruption, of Anita and Sam “mark[s] the closure not just of a period of time, but the foreclosure of possibility for a generation of rural working class youth, abandoned in a former mining village, prospectless in the face of urbanization, speculations and the loss of space” (148). On the contrary, carrying her newly recognized in-between identity, Meena waves goodbye to her innocent childhood and continues her life with more possibilities.

All in all, Meena goes through a process to distance herself from the monologically white culture, and then “live[s] with displacement and reinvent[s] herself in order to learn to cross class, social and ethnic boundaries” (Wilson 112). She finally develops herself an “in-between subject” with independence. In the course of self-discovery, she moreover recognizes her responsibility not only for family but also for her future. After the riding accident, Meena declares “It was time” because she knows it is time to change and decides to prepare for the eleven-plus exam (*AM* 284). Along with her recovery from physical injury, she steps out of her childhood bit by bit. During the hospitalization, Meena is not immobile but makes a recovery from the wound physically and mentally to prepare for starting afresh. Evidently, the hospitalization is not only a healing process but also a breaking point of her transition from childhood into her early teens.

The whole of Meena’s hospitalization and recuperation is compressed into a few pages, which mark her transformation into a more mature youth. Different from Anita’s companionship, the friendship between Meena and Robert during the hospitalization alters her views of life. Robert has to be segregated in an isolation ward because of his illness, but he always keeps optimistic, which affects Meena a lot.

Even though they only can leave message on scrape paper and show it through a pane of glass to communicate with each other, there seems to a more intense relationship between them. Not until the appearance of Robert does Meena realize what true friends are and what equality in friendship is. Uncertainty about self and eagerness for recognition prompt Meena to build the relationship with Anita. Therefore, in order to be accepted, Meena always tries to ingratiate Anita. Also, out of her fantasy about romance, she makes efforts to become a chic girl to attract Sam. However, their friendship is so temporary and unstable that eventually it comes to no good. Through Robert, Meena discovers a more positive companionship. If it is believed that Nanima is the one who liberates Meena from her confusion about South Asian ethnicity, then Robert is the one who extricate Meena from those restrained friendships. It seems that they reach a kind of understanding that is alike to the unspoken but understandable interaction between Meena and Nanima.

Hospitalized for almost four months, Meena has learned that there always comes a time to say goodbye, first to Nanima, and then to Robert. Nanima's decision to go back to India is a grief to Meena, but she holds back her depression and disappointment because she realizes that, no matter how faraway Nanima or India is, her South Asian ethnicity will bind them tightly. As for Robert, he passed away not long after Meena's leaving from the hospital. Informed by Robert's parents through a letter, Meena does not appear too overly sad. In quick succession, the two important figures, Nanima and Robert, leave her. At this moment, either separation or death becomes reality and not fantasy anymore:

> After so long of living in that dusk where my fantasies almost met reality, where longing could become possibilities, where I torture myself sweetly with dramatic scenarios of near-disasters and doomed love affairs, I was having to learn the difference between acting and being—and it hurt. I had

> enacted loss and departure so many times and thrilled to the tears I could make myself shed, but now, I could not cry at all. (*AM* 289)

"I spent a lot of time on my own that year" (297), said Meena to start the last chapter of the fiction. Apparently, Meena's response to Robert's death brings out the fact that she has grown up and become mature enough to confront the departure of a close friend. In the last chapter, Syal bestows Meena with a different and grown-up narrative tone to emphasize her transformation. Particularly significant is the shutdown of the village school, which formally confirms the termination of childhood innocence (Dunphy 638). And Meena announces: "My days as a yard member were over" (*AM* 297). She does not need anyone to identify with because she is now her own mistress and settles in her "cosy world" (*AM* 302). Meena slowly detaches from her old yard life while other Tollington kids are still fooling around.

The climax of the pond accident beside the Big House completely frees Meena from her old self, and it is also evident that Meena separates herself from the impact of Anita and Sam. The accident comes on the night before the exam when Anita's sister Tracey comes to the Kumars in panic. Tracey thinks Anita is in danger, therefore, she asks Meena for help. Nevertheless, arriving at the woods beside the Big House, Meena discovers that the so-called danger in fact is Anita's sexual intercourse with Sam. In the middle of Meena's quarrel with Sam, Tracey falls into the pond accidentally. The intervention of Harinder Singh, the owner of the Big House, saves Tracey. During the detection with Tracey's accident, Meena shows the reader that her old self has perished following the rebirth of a "fully-fledged Meena" (Schoene-Harwood 166). Meena knows well that if she gives false evidence, she will take revenge on Sam and Anita for what they have done to her; but she chooses to let go because she realizes that she has had her triumph. "It was time to let go and I floated back down into my body which, for the first time ever, fitted me to perfection

and was all mine" (*AM* 326), said Meena in an act that reveals her self-completion.

In fact, Tracey's accident lets Meena cut off her attachment to Anita and grow into a full and free selfhood. In the woods, Meena interrogates Sam's tirades at the Fete and yells that: "I *am* the others, Sam. You did mean me" (314). Here, "me" embodies Meena's recognition of her identity. She is not the other's reflection or Anita's shadow anymore. It appears that, Syal's employment of "Anita" and "me" in the title comes to light. When talking about the employment of "me" in the title, Schoene-Harwood speculates that "me" possibly implies Meena's subordinate subjectivity. He also suggests that "'me' seems like an embryonic variant of the name *Meena*, as if Syal's heroine had not yet fulfilled the requirements of autonomous selfhood" (165; italics in original). Syal never explains the title but leaves it to the imagination of her readers. The usage of "me" instead of "I" could deliberately represent "Meena" or adumbrate Meena's subordination. However, corresponding to Meena's argument with Sam, the "me" seemingly comes to represent Meena's completed selfhood. Accordingly, "Anita" in the title embodies the earlier stage at which Meena still looks for a sense of belonging. Here "Anita" is not the person whom Meena desires to become but an embodiment of Meena in her early stage of childhood. "Anita" in the title is Meena's reflection. During that period of time, in lack of emotional or spiritual support from her parents, she tried to construct her image by imitating Anita. Meena's self awareness becomes clearer and more definite within the re-construction of her understanding about self and about her South Asian ethnicity. With the final catharsis brought out by Tracey's accident, she exorcises her memories of Anita and ascertains her independent subjectivity. Ultimately, she becomes "me" with a positively in-between identity rather than somebody's ghostly shadow.

Anita and Me comes to an end when Meena attends the eleven-plus and moves

away from Tollington. According to Hussain, *Anita and Me* reveals how the social disadvantage of a lack of free choice and the fact of being non-white determine the way Meena and her family experience life (112). Ostensibly, Meena at last submits herself to meet the parental expectations by turning into a stereotypical Indian girl, "polite and sweet and enjoy spending time with family" (*AM* 148). But in fact both returning to the South Asian family and attending the exam are of Meena's own choice. It is significant that she makes decision on her own and takes control of her future, like her choice to tell the truth rather than set Anita and Sam up in front of the police. Meena finally realizes that how to live her life is all about her choice not about fate. She still believes in fate (or *karma*) but she is convinced that she has control over her future. Nanima once told Meena, "Your mama is on her second one, here, over here. And you Meena . . ." (232). Intriguingly, Nanima purposely leaves her words unsaid, which seems to imply that Meena will have a potential future if she learns how to make a choice and to take responsibility for her future. In a similar way to her parents' second chance in Britain, Meena now is going to leave Tollington as well as those old fellows to have her second chance. After undergoing alienation, displacement and internal confliction, Meena reaches her self-realization:

> I was content. I had absorbed Nanima's absence and Robert's departure like rain on parched earth, drew it in deep and drank from it. I now knew I was not a bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or no place . . . This sense of displacement I had always carried round like a curse shriveled into insignificance . . . I would not mourn too much the changing landscape around me, because I would be a traveler soon anyhow. (*AM* 303-04)

Distinct from the Big House owner's decision to stay isolated, Meena chooses to demonstrate how an exotic and mixed-up girl like her can privilege her in-betweenness and survive wherever she chooses. Therefore, with an in-between

identity, she moves on as what Sam has predicted. Through a passage into a realization of identity and responsibility, she eventually gets rid of her conflicting childhood and endows herself with "a full complement of self-awareness, wit and intelligence" (Hussain 129). Having gone through a journey from being a child of South Asian origin to a Tollington wench, Meena at last becomes proud of her ethnic background. Meena Kumar is now her own mistress. Before waving goodbye to Tollington and the past, she proclaims: "I opted for a gracious silence and kept my options open" (*AM* 328). As what she has announced, there are all kinds of possibilities, either positive or negative, waiting ahead.[21]

As mentioned in the introduction of the thesis, being an adult writer, Syal deliberately engages a child protagonist to represent her narrative voice. Taking into account Syal's use of a child as the main character, Hussain doubts that it has its drawbacks because "the child's view of life as documented in the novel is limited to her naïve perceptions and awareness which can often become frustrating for the reader" (128-29). The child narrator is questioned because of her instability, which may blur the reader's focus on the internal confliction of the character and overlook the in-depth problems existing in cultures, in ethnicities and in racial tensions. Even though Meena's narrative may be recognized as unreliable, its instability carries a kind of subversive potential. In other words, in direct contrast to the notion of the unreliability in the child narrator, the instability of the child narrator actually

[21] I am indebted to Professor Pin-chia Feng for reminding me of the fact that, to a certain extent, the sexual intercourse between Anita and Sam shocks Meena because the heterosexual relationship is what Meena always desires for. When she witnesses the affair between the two, Meena probably feels not only shocked but also jealous of Anita's intimacy with Sam. Meena is still a child, yet, in terms of her response to the relationship, it seems that Syal intends to make Meena define herself as a woman. Basically, the gap between a child's naivety and the writer's adult narrative voice highlights Meena's transition from innocent childhood to young adulthood. In the process of identity formation, Meena looks for the definition of her self, yet she also gropes for the heterosexual relationship. Through the friendship with Anita and relationship with the family, Meena defines her selfhood; similarly, her girlhood gradually evolves in her interaction with Sam. However, since *Anita and Me* uses a child as a narrator, it has its limitation in having a further discussion about gender relations in South Asian community. Therefore, we will find that Syal renders a further discussion about gender relations in her next novel *Life*.

emphasizes her endless displacement and her conflicting emotions throughout the whole story. Thus, Devon Campbell-Hall also indicates that by combining the adult experiences with the innocent perspective of a child narrator Syal deftly unfolds the uncertainty inherent in the children of immigration but at the same time alleviates the tensions existed in the portrayal of those violent racist attack. Campbell-Hall further praises that the child narrator allows Syal to "shed the authorial inhibitions that enable a polite sidestepping of awkward social issues" (293-94). With the child perspective, Syal leads the reader into the tensions between the home culture and the host culture and also offers an insight to the internal confliction among the second-generation children of immigration. The process of Meena's self-discovery and re-construction brings forth the struggle of the second generations of South Asian immigrants in Britain. It proves to be an ongoing and lifelong journey for them to construct and adjust their identities both internally and externally. As a result, the next chapter is going to begins with the doubly oppression of South Asian adult women to analyze how Syal in *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* goes on the journey of self (re)formation from a more mature perspective of South Asian female identity and how she sculpts the South Asian British womanhood through her female characters. It is significant to note that, to continue the in-betweenness in *Anita and Me*, Syal positions her three heroines in between free choices and over-determined fate are faced with a more complicated and conflicting dilemma. Reading about how they deal with issues of migration, shifting identities, cultural hybridities, as well as fluid and fractured relationships at home and in marriage, we are presented with a relatively comprehensive spectrum of South Asian British womanhood.

Chapter Three

Seeking and Becoming Her South Asian British Self

> Everything else I can pick up or discard when I choose; my culture is a movable feast . . . I made a choice about the kind of life I wanted to have. When things go belly up, Chila always blames karma, Sunita blames her failed university career, I blame no-one but myself.
>
> — Tania, *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*

When discussing the role of a child narrator in *Anita and Me*, Devon Campbell-Hall suggests that a child's point of view provides Meera Syal a platform to interrogate the dominant culture. The child protagonist presents the reader not only her navigation between British and South Asian cultures but also a fluctuation "between childhood innocence and adult knowledge" (Campbell-Hall 291). When the focus shifts to Syal's second novel *Life*, the reader will find that both the narrative voice and the social landscape alter dramatically. Through her protagonist Meena in *Anita and Me,* Syal has shown how a South Asian British young girl is at first doubly estranged in her identity formation and eventually recognizes the power of her in-betweenness to move on to a future she chooses. Meena's in-between position indeed exemplifies Bhabha's theory of liminal space which is a productive space for her to negotiate the differences between two cultures and to develop an identity that integrates both the parental and dominant cultures. As Campbell-Hall has praised, "Within the fluid, unstable space between childhood and adolescence, between Britishness and Indianness, Meena is able to narrate the events within her community from a defamiliarized point of view . . ." (293). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that

Meena's characterization has its limitation to present the reader a more complex account of how South Asians, especially adult women, deal with the cultural conflicts in a grown-up world. Because she is still at a young age and can be too ingenuous to fully understand the adult world, Meena therefore may be inadequate, as a narrator, to fully represent the life experiences of South Asians in family, social interaction and marital relationship. Thus, in her second novel, Syal uses three adult women to give a different narrative perspective.

Ensconced in East London in the late 1990s, *Life* begins with a bustling wedding scene, implying the children of first-generation immigrants have grown up and moved into another stage of their lives. Syal maps out her three heroines in the same generation as Meena yet endows them with distinct adult characterizations. In their mid-thirties, the three adult women are now facing broader spectrum of problems about race and gender. Discussing the "multi foci" on South Asian British women's life experiences in *Life*, Dave Gunning believes that Syal "refuses this unitary vision of Asian women in Britain and stresses the heterogeneity of experiences and identities available to British Asian women" (122). Furthermore, despite the multi foci on various female characters, Syal mainly stresses the double oppression of South Asian British women. And she illustrates the female characters' awareness of their dilemma in a doubly oppressed position and then the process of their self-development. It is significant to note that, to continue the in-betweenness in *Anita and Me*, Syal positions her three heroines between free choices and fate, facing with a more complicated and conflicting dilemma.

The fictional space in Syal's novel facilitates a discussion about cultural conflicts and domestic tensions among South Asian British women. Further questions emerge as the plot progresses. First and foremost, what is the significance of using women as the main narrative voice? The British women of South Asian descent indeed provide

the reader a specific point of reference to inspect the awkward conditions of the second generations of immigrants in Britain. Therefore, it can be seen that, rather than using “a potentially unreliable child” (Campbell-Hall 291) in *Anita and Me*, *Life* uses three seemingly more mature women as protagonists to explore the domestic tensions between different generations and problematic relationships in sisterhood as well as in gender relations. Through multiple viewpoints of various female protagonists, *Life* discloses for the reader a more complex realm in which South Asian adult women are positioned. Meanwhile, it also addresses the issues of identity, race and gender faced by the women in both British society and South Asian community. These adult women are represented as straddling the fence between the British and South Asian cultures as well as swaying between individual will and familial duties. By means of different living backgrounds of South Asian women, Syal outlines not only individual awareness but also a collective formation of South Asian British womanhood. Another question is the role of the male characters within the novel. It can be seen that the focus of Syal’s writings is not exclusively confined to women; male characters, too, play an indispensable part. The male characters actually contribute significantly to the (re)formation of the women’s selfhood, even though they are oftentimes depicted as self-centered, chauvinist or violent. In fact, within the patriarchal community, male characters are not only enforcers but also the oppressed of patriarchal ideologies. On one hand, Syal shapes her male characters into patriarchal figures to criticize the perpetuation of patriarchal institution within South Asian community. On the other hand, the male characters are shown as being incapable of handling familial or marital relationships. Syal intentionally shows in context that women are able to demonstrate greater fortitude than men do when facing predicament.

In addition to representing multi-dimensional life experiences of South Asian women to challenge social stereotypes, Syal proves that women are able to

"collectively dismissed traditional notions of womanhood and asserted a strong and confident image in their creativity" (Hussain 54). So, reading about how the three heroines deal with issues of migration, shifting identities, cultural hybriditites, as well as fluid and fractured relationships at home and in marriage, we are presented with an epitome of South Asian women's collective experiences in Britain. Also, we can see how Syal deploys not only female characters but also male ones to undermine social expectations of how South Asian British women or men should behave. In this chapter the aim is firstly to examine how South Asian British womanhood takes shape as Syal's three heroines go through transformations in their lives that lead to their realization of identity, ethnicity and sexuality. It is followed by an analysis seeking to unravel the significance of male characters within Syal's novel to see how they are served as a contrast to the dignity and fortitude of female protagonists.

Evidently, South Asians in Britain try hard to assimilate into the white society and at the same time maintain South Asian tradition and values at home. Nevertheless, during the process of acculturation and adaptation, encounters with racial discrimination and prejudices are inevitable. A seemingly irreconcilable conflict therefore arises from the collision between how South Asians identify themselves and how white Britons perceive them. And it is notable that, compared to the men in South Asian community, South Asian women are relatively in a more complicated condition. They have to confront the additional issue of gender. When discussing the self-development of ethnic women in "Rethinking the *Bildungsroman*," Pin-chia Feng argues that while ethnic men are trapped in Du Bois's "double consciousness," ethnic women de facto "suffer from *triple*, even *multiple*, consciousness, as they stand further outside the margin of the marginal groups, being non-white and female" (16; italics in original). As Feng has stated, ethnic women are faced with gender and racial inequalities because of their position between the dominant society and ethnic

community.[22] In the white community, being non-whites, South Asian women need to learn how to get along with their in-betweenness. Getting back to the ethnic groups, they have to reconcile their roles as mothers, daughters and wives within South Asian patriarchy. Regulations and patriarchal ideologies in South Asian cultural practices in fact subjugate women to various duties; for example, their submissiveness to the arranged marriage or to familial demands. Whilst the second-generation South Asian women are far more confident in expressing their ethnicity and are more willing to question the submissiveness than the preceding generation of women, they are still greatly influenced and oppressed by cultural expectations. Confined to cultural restrictions and their filial duties, hardly any of South Asian women can completely escape from the destined life course. However, according to Yasmin Hussain, westernized South Asian women seek to break away from those restrictions and duties because of their British upbringing (30). Encouraged by the notions of independence and self-reliance in the British education, South Asian women now are more inclined to probe into their own identities and to carve out their unique South Asian British womanhood. Thus, the younger generation of South Asian women try to explore a more fluid and flexible way for them to survive within the patriarchal societies. Because of their self-awareness, there emerges the so-called "New Woman" in the South Asian community (Hussain 16). As Hussain points out,

> [The New Woman] has become the embodiment of escape, from restrictions within the home and questions of marriage and instead resurrects a belief in education allowing women to lead financially independent and fulfilling lives. Furthermore, this New Woman acquires and establishes for herself a

[22] In *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston: A Postmodern Reading*, Pin-chia Feng presents a picture of female *Bildungsroman* for ethnic women of marginal groups. In fact, to question some scholars' narrow focus and traditional definition on *Bildungsroman*, Feng re-views the significance of *Bildungsroman* by juxtaposing the four texts by Morrison and Kingston. Her emphasis on ethnic women's "danc[e] in the minefield of gender and racial inequality" (16) precisely echoes the double oppression of South Asian British women I would like to talk about.

> distinct identity in the traditionally male-dominated society in which she lives. (54)

Apparently, the developments as well as the transition of South Asian women are what Syal wants to depict in *Life*. In the novel Syal attempts to deal with not only the cultural conflicts among South Asian communities but also the process of how South Asian women shed the baggage of patriarchy to determine their own future and develop their own individuality.

Unlike the previous discussion about the identity formation of South Asian British youth in *Anita and Me*, in *Life* Syal proceeds to amplify the dilemmas that many South Asian women have faced in life, in family, and even in sexual relationship. In fact, in the screenplay *Bhaji on the Beach*, which probably can be reckoned as a prototype of *Life*, Syal has already demonstrated her concern about race, gender and patriarchy.[23] In the screenplay, she stresses intergenerational differences and ossified values within South Asian community. Through multiple perspectives from different female protagonists, in both *Bhaji on the Beach* and *Life*, Syal endeavors to deal with the interweaving relations among gender and ethnicity in South Asian communities in Britain. In the two works, women are the central protagonists; nevertheless, their sense of belonging or their recognition of self

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[23] *Bhaji on the Beach*, Syal's first screenplay, is directed by Gurinder Chadha and screened in 1993. Born in Kenya, Gurinder Chadha moved to Britain with her parents in 1961. She is a British film director of South Asian descent and good at dealing with ethnic issues among South Asian communities in Britain. Because of her upbringing, most of her films explore both the lives of South Asians in Britain and the cross-cultural conflicts. Chadha gains a worldwide fame with her well-received film *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002). *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) is her first feature film.

Bhaji on the Beach can be reckoned as an archetype of *Life* because of their similar narrative strategies, including the focus on quandaries of three South Asian adult women and the narrative techniques. *Bhaji on the Beach* deploys its protagonist Asha's hallucinations to bring out South Asian British women's conflicting dilemma and their internal struggles. In "South Asian Womanhood in the Diaspora: Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach*, and *Bent It Like Beckham*," Feng describes Asha's first hallucination in which the deity Rama intones "Duty! Honor! Sacrifice!" to declare the destiny of South Asian women (166). Moreover, Feng states that the six scenes of hallucinations actually represent Asha's self-discovery.

As well, aside from "an omniscient narrator" (Gunning 122), Syal in *Life m*akes each heroine have her firs-person narration respectively. These narrations not only disclose the contradictory feelings of the three heroines but also delineate their interrogation and further awareness of self.

somehow is marginalized. All the issues about home, identity, belonging and relationships reinforce the intersections and negotiations of cultural differences. Indeed, similar to *Life, Bhaji on the Beach* has a multi-dimensional representation of South Asian British women; even so, as a screenplay, it has its limitation in portraying specific details and other subtle features. This is because a screenplay or a film can be less effective in offering the audience a deeper insight into the characters' internal conflict than a novel does. Compared with *Bhaji on the Beach*, *Life* lets the reader observe more detailed interactions between three intimate friends and have more opportunities to inspect how the protagonists make their cultural choices. By mapping out a wider range of challenges among the three heroines, in the novel Syal gives a more complex yet reality-reflecting account of circumstances faced by South Asian women in Britain.

Set in urban London, in *Life*, Syal depicts the lives in a year of three intimate friends: Sunita, Chila and Tania. Sunita, who used to be a bookish person, now is married and has two children, Nikita and Sunil, and becomes a "Super Mummyji." She was once recognized by her friends as the "Most Likely to Succeed" in school (*Life* 17). Nevertheless, she failed her finals and got flunked out of the university. After leaving the school, she married Akash, who is now a marriage counselor. Once being a brilliant law school student, now she has settled into an exhausting domesticity day after day. Sunita, in fact, is completely devoted to her marriage and fully puts her kids and family first. Gradually, she becomes dissatisfied with herself and her husband's frequent absence in household affairs. Chila, the baby, also the most naïve among the three, is getting married with wealthy and smashing Deepak who appears to be a perfect husband. Chila has always been regarded as delicate and timid, yet she seems to surprisingly hit the jackpot by capturing a desirable groom through an arranged marriage. However, the fairytale marriage of her dreams turns

out to be an illusion and gradually Chila senses the cruel but real difficulties in matrimony. Tania, an ambitious career girl, is the pivot throughout the whole story. She, sexy and smart, is a single and successful packager and also a filmmaker. She not only has an up-and-coming career but also maintains an admirable relationship with Martin, a white British who has been exceedingly fascinated with exotic cultures. Under the surface of splendid lifestyle and impressive achievements on work, Tania actually has exiled from her family and community for years.

Sunita, Chila, and Tania are now at the crossroads. They all have strived to make life as perfect as what they have always expected it to be. Yet, fate appears to interfere with their ostensibly ideal lives all the time. Sunita, for instance, at first believes that she has a nice family life but later finds herself trapped by unceasing domestic routines. She further gets deeply disappointed at her dismal jobs and feels frustrated in the gradual alienation from Akash. As for Chila, she is the one who faithfully obeys traditions and follows her parents' arrangement because she is convinced that the elders would make the best decision for her. However, once married, she starts to realize that matrimony is not as romantic as what she has imagined. Tania is not only attractive and svelte but also has a "snappy Soho job" (*Life* 16) that most people dream of. Nevertheless, she has been keenly aware of the fact that she belongs to none: neither to British society nor to South Asian community. "You don't belong" (13) is a voice that keeps echoing in her mind; hence, Tania refuses to be seen as an Asian and tries to avoid reporting issues related to Asians. For Tania, it seems that some uncomfortable truths would be uncovered as soon as she rebuilds the connection with her South Asian descent.

Significantly different from *Anita and Me*, *Life* provides a thorough insight into the adult women's innermost thoughts and astute feelings. Regarding the characterization of the three heroines in *Life*, Campbell-Hall states that Syal applies

an equal treatment to the characterization and “elegantly manages to shift authorial voice from among the three young women, lending a surprising maturity to a narrative focusing primarily on the agonies of the shift from adolescence to young adulthood” (298). In addition, as the central characters, the three women “represent a ‘trinary’ opposition of content/depressed/alienated” (Campbell-Hall 300) which appears to be stereotypical perception of South Asian women. As a matter of fact, in her writings, Syal does not ward off these stereotypes of South Asian women. On the contrary, she seems to intentionally represents her characters in these stereotyped images, which, indeed accord with Gill Gregory’s observation in her review that “Syal explores the fracturing of identity experienced by women who have consciously or unconsciously chosen to fit in with prescribed roles” (26; qtd. in Gunning 123).

Starting with a joyful wedding between Chila and Deepak, *Life* is framed with a typical “ha ha hee hee” atmosphere in a traditional Indian wedding. The first part of the novel is mainly concerned with three relationships between three different couples: one is newly wedded, another has married for quite some years, and the other still in courtship. After the wedding, Tania is encouraged by her white boss to have Chila and Sunita take part in the documentary project on love and marriage in South Asian British community. Through the lens, the documentary faithfully records emotional entanglement within their relationships. It also unmasks the instabilities and frailties behind the happiness of marriage and friendship. The early days of Chila and Deepak’s life together seem to be sweet and harmonious. Compared with the pleasant union of the newly wedded couple, the marriage between Sunita and Akash, now full of conflicts, apparently is at the opposite pole. As for Tania’s relationship with her white boyfriend Martin, it grows more and more problematic as Tania’s documentary progresses. At first, both Chila and Sunita are willing to demonstrate the ideal part of their marriage; nevertheless, at the opening party, they find that the documentary

indeed displays a perfect image of matrimony but simultaneously it also uncovers the reality hidden behind their so-called happy marriage. The documentary faithfully discloses the reality of Chila's over naivety and Sunita's failing marriage. Ending up exposing the hardship that South Asian adult women are confronted with because of their conflicting position between South Asian community and British society, the documentary ironically receives great response from the audience. Sunita and Chila's faith about life and marriage is shattered. But what utterly smashes them is that they witness Tania's clinch with her former secret lover, Deepak, now Chila's husband. *Life* ends its first part with the nearly broken friendship and a marriage at its icy point.

The beginning of the second part, with the title "Spring," however, implies that any severe condition eventually will pass and a prospective new start will soon arrive. Principally the second part continues with the depictions of each character's life and the main focus still lies on the three heroines. However, it is noteworthy that all characters seem to have their lives reshuffled. After the night of the *première*, both Chila and Sunita seem to acquire a different attitude toward life. Chila's pregnancy invokes her maternal feeling and makes her tougher and more independent than before. Sunita has gradually walked out from her fixed role as a dutiful mother and wife, learning to spare herself some free time and space to re-experience life. After Martin breaks up with Tania and moved out from the apartment they have once shared, Tania restarts her life with Deepak and their relationship now is an open secret. During the period of Chila's pregnancy and Tania's affair with Deepak, the three heroines begin to reflect on the beliefs they once have and their endeavor to redefine selves. They go through a transition to interrogate what it means to be a woman in South Asian community in Britain. The climax happens when Deepak snatches Chila's newborn baby but fails to flee the country because Tania has already taken Deepak's passport away and destroyed it. The three ladies eventually get reconciled

and patch up their friendship. As Tania narrates: “I sat next to them both on the floor, took each of their hands and complete the circle” (320). The circle of friendship and female belonging is thus completed and the three friends are united again. With this loving note, *Life* closes with the funeral of Tania’s father. The denouement of death, to some degree, indicates that hard times will end and what lies ahead of the three heroines is a prospective future. In the end of the story, Chila wholeheartedly plays her role as a single mother and plans to visit India with the baby someday. Sunita and Akash try to rebuild their marriage. Tania is finally willing to embrace her ethnicity and works hard on her media projects, trying to improve the living conditions of South Asians in Britain.

In *Life*, Chila is depicted as a traditional South Asian female, submissive to fate and content with parental arrangements. There are only two choices for her: getting fine education or a good marriage. It is her fate as well as her duty. Her parents agree to let her drop out of the school because they believe, according to a fortuneteller, she will marry young. Then she gives up the promotion in the supermarket she works for simply because Deepak tells her to do so. As Chila recalls: “he said no wife of his was going to work, if she didn’t want to. (I did want to as it happens but he forgot to ask me that bit)” (*Life* 33). Before she gets married, she has already recognized the inferiority and subjugation she would face in the matrimony after she becomes a wife:

> I reckon it was more that he was a teensy bit embarrassed that his fiancée swiped cans of beans for a living, especially since I’ve met some of his friends’ wives who wear sequined tracksuits and spend one morning a week helping with their husbands’ businesses and the rest of the time doing interesting charity events . . . . (33)

Within the text, Chila reveals women’s subjugated position in marriage. Even though Chila has foreseen that her marriage would be built upon an unequal relationship, she

still chooses to “walk the walk of everyone’s mothers on all their weddings, meekly, shyly, reluctantly towards matrimony” (*Life* 12). Before the wedding, she tries to live up to parental expectations; after that, she resigns herself to her husband, as what the pandit declares on the wedding: “Her old life as her father’s daughter has ended. Her new life as her husband’s wife has begun” (15). Interestingly, it is Chila’s firm belief in fate makes her convinced this is exactly what she is meant to be: “I know that at some point in the future he’s going to severely piss me off, but I’m ready for it. I look forward to it, funnily enough, because it’s all part of the plan. You find someone, they love you, they hurt you, you forgive them, you carry on . . .” (36). Chila fully expresses her submission to fate.

By contrast, Sunita is portrayed as a political activist who seriously loathes those cultural stereotypes bestowed upon South Asian women. Questioning the conservative notions of family in South Asian culture, Sunita rejects traditional female roles. She picks her own mate rather than mates with someone picked up for her. In order to defy the parental authority in family, she quits her law studies to pursue love. Moreover, she also attends the protest marches for women as a means to fight against stereotyped female identity in the society. She even exclaims: “Life is good, simple and mine” (*Life* 86). However, it is ironic that she devotes herself to restless domesticities after she settles down with Akash. Although she is still enthusiastic with the women’s group, most of her time and energy has already been occupied by household affairs. Sunita, who was once so rebellious and led an avant-garde lifestyle—she wore her Doc Marten boots under the traditional *shalwar kameez*—now has turned into a dutiful mother and wife. And her dressing style, too, now has been “maternal”: she dresses herself with “a map of motherhood, marked out by handprints, chocolate streaks and recent vomit stain which bloomed from her breast like some damp crusty flower” (14). Over time, she is exhausted, both physically and mentally, by taking

care of her husband, children, and numerous domesticities that she once refused to deal with. Gradually, she gets depressed by the sense of dissatisfaction with herself as well as by Akash's indifference and neglect of household affairs. In public, she tends to pretend that she enjoys a pleasant union with Akash, but in fact, the condition of her marriage is deteriorating. She, however, tries to convince herself that her marriage with Akash will last long: "I can wait. I have given up so much to be where I am now; it seems the . . . careful thing to do" (91). Sunita, with her self-contradictions, introduces tensions and her uncompromising disposition to "explode the accepted notion of the passivity of South Asian females" (Campbell-Hall 302).

Lying in between the submissive Chila and the insubordinate Sunita, Tania is comparatively dispassionate. However, as the story progresses, we find that she is also full of ambivalence inwardly. Determined to retain the power of self-definition, Tania articulates the British and South Asian aspects of her personality in her own way. It is implied that, by virtue of her exotic appearance and ethnic backgrounds, the "Modern Girl" Tania obtains her "English man and snappy Soho job" (16). Indeed, Tania successfully manipulates a "white gaze on the lookout for the exotic" (Banerjee 69) to combine her ethnic heritage and her British present to perform her own ethnicity. As Tania admits about her fashion choices,

> See how I combine this bindi with that leather jacket and make a bold statement about my duality? Look! I can go to a rave one night, and the next morning be cooking in the communal temple kitchen! Watch how I glide effortlessly from old paths to new pastures, creating a new culture as I walk on virgin snow! (*Life* 146)

Campbell-Hall also comments that Tania "conveniently calls upon the cultural marketability of her ethnic heritage whenever it suits" (302). Tania appears to be a self-sufficient career woman that functions independently of either her British

upbringing or her South Asian heritage.

Nevertheless, her relationship with both the family and the community is incompatible or even conflicting. When facing South Asian community, she feels connected but also alienated at the same time. On Chila's wedding, Tania senses those uneasy inspections from curious and gossip relatives. These people remind her of the ethnic roots they have shared. For Tania, both the community events and the endless questions seem to echo in her mind—"You are destined to be part of us, but sometimes you just do not belong to any of them":

> She suddenly remembered why she had stopped attending community events, cultural evenings, bring-a-Tupperware parties, all the engagements, weddings and funeral that marked out their borrowed time here . . . The endless questions of who what why she was, to whom she belonged (father/husband/workplace), why her life wasn't following the ordained patterns for a woman of her age, religion, height and income bracket. *The sheer physical effrontery of her people, wanting to be inside her head, to own her, claim her, preserve her. Her people*. (*Life* 13; italics mine)

At this moment, Tania experiences the pain of uncertainty about her self and her family. In fact, Tania's alienation from her ethnic roots can be found in her indifferent interactions within the family and community where she grows up. She detests her dominating father's constant bluff and also abhors her meek mother's over passivity. For her, her parents epitomize the patriarchal institution within South Asian conventional norms. As a result, after her mother's death, Tania leaves her family. But, in actuality, she is yearning for a sense of belonging deep inside. One night, she reveals her depression and longing when she cries furiously in front of Martin: "I haven't been at home, feeding everyone, supporting everyone, smiling at everyone, keeping the family going, *filling the hole*" (108; italics mine). The hole is actually "[a]

mother-shaped hole" belonging to women and to mothers who "had plans, boundaries, a place" (109). And such a place is exactly what Tania is looking for.

Gradually, Tania realizes the source of her ambivalence towards Martin. At first, regardless of the social disapproval of her romance with a white, she insists to be with Martin, attempting to prove that she can define her identity in a way that makes sense in her terms. Although Martin is like a "big blond giant Viking" who is "different enough to free [her] from [her] past," (*Life* 151) she still attempts to find a "knowing sign of recognition formed within the Asian community, such as the sound of the Punjabi endearment" (Gunning 126). Tania's own problem in the relationship with Martin, coupled with Chila's faithful subjugation to her husband and Sunita's complete sacrifice for her family, eventually leads her to rethink about the issue of "who we really were" (*Life* 146). Hence, she undertakes the documentary project on South Asian marriages. Tania knows very well that the documentary will cause disturbances to their lives. Yet, she is well prepared and gets ready for the coming storm, which is expected to challenge and change their friendship (*Life* 172). According to Campbell-Hall, Tania's role as a filmmaker not only makes her the central role in the story, it also serves as a literary tool for Syal to provide an "objective witness to the inconsistencies within the British Asian community from which she stems" (302). Campbell-Hall proposes that while shooting the film, Tania's uncertain position enables her to be a "defamiliarized narrator" to deconstruct "painful discrepancies within the represented life experiences of contemporary second-generation British Asians" (302-03).[24] Tania's documentary, without any

[24] When talking about Syal's literary device of using a second-generation immigrant child as the narrator in *Anita and Me*, Campbell-Hall states that the child narrator deconstructs various aspects of multicultural British Society because of her characteristic of "defamiliarizatoion," (290-91) which is derived from Victor Shlosky's essay "Art as Technique." Then Campbell-Hall recognizes Tania in *Life* as a "defamiliazed narrator" of Syal to provide a relatively objective witness about marital relationships in South Asian community (299; 302-03). As Campbell-Hall argues, being as a filmmaker, Tania's objective viewpoint actually reflects Shklovsky's premise that "the purpose of art is to impart the

modification, not only truly records the real conditions in various marriages but also straightforwardly present her best friends' seemingly solid relationships with their husbands. Through the camera angle, she presents an unsentimental and objective point of view. Such a view point, true yet also ironic, gives the audience a strong impact on their expectations about married life and also smashes her best friends' self-deception on their happy marriages at the same time. Chila and Sunita finally recognize that for a long time they have lived in a fantasy that their marriages are solid and happy. What is worse, they have even tried to convince themselves that the fantasy is the fact simply because they do not dare to admit their marriages is imperfect, nor want to face the difficulties existing between them and their spouses. Their seemingly happy and steady relationships bear false appearances, unreliable and fragile. And undisguised interactions and responses in the documentary finally crack open their self-deception.

The second part begins with "Spring" to suggest the season transits from harsh winter time to prosperous spring days, which symbolizes the three women's transition. In the beginning of the second part, the author gives the reader a brief summary of each character's current life, except for Tania's. From the summary, the reader see that Chila is pregnant and now she has a different point of view toward life:

> [Chila] would go into that front room right now and tell all these young girls to go away and pack a bag and travel and read and climb mountains and see the view from somewhere very high and bright and maybe send her a postcard so she could remind herself of a different view. (*Life* 199)

Appreciably, Chila is getting used to an independent life without the company of her

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sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are now. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar'" (20; qtd. in Campbell-Hall 303).

Concerning the perspective of "defamiliarizatoion," please see: Shloysy, Victor. "Art as Technique." *Modern Criticism and Theory.* Ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 1988: 15-30. and Cox, Michael W. "Interpreters of Cultural Difference: The Use of Children in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Fiction." *South Asian Review* 24.2 (2003): 120-32.

husband. After having her prenatal check-ups, Chila comes to be aware that, even without her husband, she can still shoulder all the responsibilities of life, of her child, and of her future. Therefore, Chila starts learning how to be the mistress of herself rather than just a wife of her husband. When giving birth to the baby, she bursts out screaming and cursing. In her last claims, she conveys a resolution:

> Mine
> I dont know, haven't looked
> boy or girl
> who cares?
> Mine (285)

Using broken sentences and colloquial language, Syal deftly portrays the pain and joy in the process of child delivery. Especially the pithy comment "Mine" exhibits Chila's determined attitude.

As for Sunita, she manages to extricate herself from domesticity and leave herself a bit free time. She even marks off her stuff and Akash's with Post-its with indications like "YOUR MESS" and "MY MESS - PLEASE LEAVE" (201). No doubt the change of Sunita's philosophy toward life is an immense one. Even though she is still Akash's wife and their children's mother, she now decides not to completely devote herself to familial affairs like she once did. Sunita and Akash's relationship appears to reach a deadlock after the film *première*, though both of them avoid talking about their marital crisis. The only way they can understand and speak to each other now probably is "via graffiti in a book" (207). The graffiti actually offer Sunita and Akash an opportunity to re-open their conversation. In the meanwhile Sunita goes through a journey of self-discovery to reconnect herself with the life and self. She gets hair cut, changes dressing style and regains her fearless and critical statement against social injustice and ethnic prejudices to South Asian women. For

Sunita, the night of the film *première* is extraordinary and it kindles her desire to review her life:

> Sunita knew she could reassure him now, laugh it off and hold out her hand, saying Come to bed and be my husband. But somehow, that would negate her extraordinary evening in which she had rediscovered her passions, her backbone, her legs, her equals . . . . (225)

Accompanying Chila to the hospital for check-ups allows Sunita to reassess her everyday role as a wife and a mother. She enjoys her time in the hospital because she is interested in Chila's doctor, who is nearly ten years junior to Sunita. In fact, Sunita's feeling for the doctor is not adoration but a need for being respected and appreciated. After Chila delivers the baby and leaves the hospital, Sunita realizes that her journey of self-discovery comes to its end at the same time. She also realizes that it is time for her to rebuild her relationship with Akash. As what she describes her situation at the moment "The waiting is nearly over. A new life" (245).

To a certain extent, Tania's filming of the documentary, which is an act of betrayal of her friends, gives her the courage to throw off all her misgivings in mind and encourages her to embrace her South Asian ethnicity. Previously, she was lonely and "used to not belonging anywhere totally" (*Life* 54). She determines her own ethnicity and weaves in between her British present and South Asian roots. But, with time, she is tired of her performance. She senses that her loneliness would be intensified whenever she is with Chila and Sunita. Chila and Sunita's apparent stability reminds her of what she lacks. She also wants to settle down, not with Martin, but with someone who can share and understand her ethnicity. So she starts the relationship with Deepak again. To resume her relationship with Deepak, in fact, demonstrates her intent to confirm who she really is. Different from Martin, Deepak represents South Asian ethnicity that Tania is always longing for but dares not to

embrace. In the past, the reason why Tania broke up with Deepak is that she is afraid they would become their parents and have the same way of living. But now, rather than having a busy and vibrant life, she prefers a peaceful and ordinary one which can afford her a sense of belonging.

Apparently, Tania is the one who has suffered from her uncertain position ever since her youth. Her perennial denial to embrace her South Asian ethnicity puts her in a quandary. Being rebellious against the traditional ideology and culture of her parents' generation, she still cannot find a proper orientation in British community. Tania's resistance de facto derives from her fear of being caught in such an unequal relationship as her parents. She has been afraid that if she chooses the same route as her mother does, she will become trapped in everlasting devotion to familial affairs. Thus she takes a defensive attitude toward her own culture and her family until her new Jewish boss Mark remarks,

> 'The ghetto got you where you are today, Tania. It's what makes you different . . . You can't separate what you're good from what you are. But you can use it to get you into a position of power and take it from there. First, you've got to now your voice, and then you've got to like it. Get it?' (*Life* 257)

Here, Syal additionally composes an argument between Tania and her Jewish boss to emphasize Tania's uncertainty about the self, which reads:

> 'Does being Jewish inform your every daily activity? Do you wake up, check you're still circumcised and hum "Hava Nagila" all the way to the office?'
>
> 'I don't have to,' Mark replied, getting up stiffly from the desk. 'I know who I am, so I've got nothing to prove . . . . (257)

Mark's words prompt Tania's ideas to adopt a positive relationship with her own

culture. And the following notification about her father's serious illness further draws her back to the family. She knows very well that she fails being a daughter and confesses that "she may be top dog, big boots in that far off TV land, but here, where it mattered, she was nobody" (297). For the rest of her father's life, he has Tania's company, which signifies reconciliation between father and daughter. Eventually, Tania understands that she does not need for acceptance by others to ascertain where her position is. It is the family that has been waiting for her since she left. After the kidnap episode of Chila's baby ends, Tania says affirmatively: "I have my own family to visit" (326). Tania finally determines to embrace her family, who actually can offer her a sense of belonging she has been looking for. And her decision to reunite with her father and brother, in some ways, symbolizes her re-connection with her South Asian descent. She is now willing to confront her South Asian ethnicity with a more positive attitude.

Through *Anita and Me* to *Life*, with her use of humor, irony, and witty conversations, Syal leads her readers to step into the cultural confusions and the darker sides of South Asian immigrant community in Britain. It is worthy of note that she does not confine those characters to a definite or decided ending but gives them a future with limitless potential instead. In the end of *Anita and Me*, Meena's decision to attend the eleven-plus exam is not a submission to parental authority but an attempt to open more possibilities to her future. As for the three women in *Life*, their lives at first are almost all messed up, including marriage and friendship. Because of having a hard time with family, with husbands, and even with the most intimate friends, they questioned themselves and felt uncertain about future. However, like Meena, they finally develop a new sense of the self and free themselves from the sense of gender overdetermination. More importantly, they make choices to let go of something that they once have fixated upon. Take Sunita for example, after flaring up with Akash and

getting all her dissatisfaction about life, marriage, and family off chest, she still chooses to be a wife to go on with her life. What is different is that she is now a wife willingly to express her feelings and to negotiate with the family more openly. Chila, at last, wakes up from the romantic fancy about marriage and family life. The decision of divorce and her insistence on taking care of her baby boy turn her into a brave mother. As for Tania, she finishes the affair with Deepak and leaves Martin as well. And she musters the courage to go back to family and to face her dying father. For Tania, the family, especially her father, is the toughest nut that she cannot crack easily. Hence, taking care of her critically ill father represents Tania's transformation. She decides to take up her responsibility of being as a daughter as well as a member of South Asian community. Rather than ending the novel with Meenas's prospective future as in *Anita and Me*, *Life* deploys the funeral of Tania's father to be its denouement. It seems that *Life* has a sad ending; nonetheless, death here means the termination of hard times for the three heroines, and everything is going to have a new beginning after the funeral.

Putting her three heroines through experiencing conflicting dilemmas and self-awareness, Syal indeed envisions a potential reconstruction of the self for them. With both heart-breaking and heart-warming episodes in their life, the three heroines all face distress and frustration related to multifarious problems of family, of sex, and of marriage. Nonetheless, they are lucky enough to recognize and ruminate over the value and potentiality of the self. They eventually find a position that allows them to reconcile their roles as mothers, daughters and wives. Yet, when we survey the three women's multi-dimensional life experiences and applaud for their recognition of self value, we need to realize that, in the process of South Asian adult women's self-awareness and development, the relations with husbands, boyfriends and even fathers give women impetus to initiate their self-discovery. While examining *Life*, it

will be found that although the male characters are formed as patriarchal figures, they actually bear conflicting features as women do.

"Most of the male characters in the text are shown as having imbibed worst essence of their indigenous patriarchal cultures," (125) commented Dasgupta in her discussion about male characters in *Life*. When speaking of male characters in Syal's works, it should be noticed that their ambivalence is on a par with the women's. In common with South Asian British women, the male characters live in between the mainstream society and the traditional community. Correspondingly, they are actually in the same uncertainty and struggle when facing the same cultural conflict as the women do. As well, they need to follow the conventional norms and live up to parental expectations. The male characters have grown up, imbibed and influenced by the patriarchal institution which endows them with the power and responsibility to be in charge of the whole family financially and to maintain the familial unity. In spite of occupying certain social predominance, there are still duties and expectations waiting for the men to shoulder. Dasgupta considers that male characters in Syal's texts possess the worst quality pertaining to their patriarchal cultures. It needs to be emphasized that for Syal within South Asian patriarchy women are not the only victims, men also suffer. Similarly, women are not always weak; oftentimes they show relatively unbending will than men do.

In *Life*, the assortment of male characters roughly includes three types. Apart from the turn-up of the white male Martin, there are two more types of male characters.[25] The first one is attractive Deepak who is seemingly gentle and refined.

[25] Tania's boyfriend Martin belongs to the third kind of male characters who in fact occupy an important position in cross-cultural negotiations in Syal's texts. In consideration of the length and topic of this thesis project, Martin's white male gaze to the exotic will be shortly discussed in the footnote.

At first Martin is attracted to Tania's exotic features which reveal a desirable form of difference. As a writer, Martin even envies Tania's exotic being and "feels himself excluded and without a voice and a story that could be told" (Dasgupta 121). Dasgupta comments that Martin's desires to possess the "epic scope" rightly in accord with Heidi Safia Mirza's "new 'imperialism of oppression'" (20; qtd. in

He looks moderate and confident; even so, behind his amiable disposition, there appears to be unfathomable darkness within him. He dutifully gives in to parental expectations and demands his wife to be obedient likewise. Before deciding to settle down, Deepak always uses family as an excuse to shun commitment with the white women he dates. Similar to Tania resistance to become her mother, Deepak wants to prove that he will never become his father, as he always claims: "We have choices" (10). The narrator shows Deepak's internal struggle and attempt to reassure himself during the wedding ceremony:

> Fear of commitment, he'd said to the stone in the spring . . . Fear of failure, he'd told the stone as he'd eyed up the passing girls from his pavement café . . . Fear of becoming my father, he'd smiled at the stone . . . recalling his parents' amazed faces as he'd confirmed his choice of bride. A Punjabi girl! . . . Marrying her does not mean I will become my father, take up religion, grow nostril hair and wear pastel-coloured leisure wear, he told the stone playfully." (10)

The "stone" here may imply Deepak's heart which is cold and hard. Each time, when he refers to one of his fears, he talks about the stone. The stone, intriguingly, becomes Deepak's only listener that is willing to tolerate all his weaknesses and darkness. Marrying Chila is his strategy to negotiate his belonging within South Asian community. His request for Chila to follow his demand is to prove that he still has the dominant position in life. Apparently, his life vacillates between what he should do and what he can do. Deepak has dual personalities: one is to acquire the power of dominance, and the other is to yield to social expectations. Consequently, when

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Dasgupta 121). Martin represents a mainstream's nostalgia for the exotic. For further exploration of the phenomenon of mainstream nostalgia, see also Mita Banerjee's "Indian Diaspora Meets Indo-chic—Fragmentation, Fashion, and Resistance in Meera Syal's *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*" and Heidi Safia Mirza's book- lengthy study *Black British Feminism: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

feeling his dominance is challenged, Deepak acts crazy and violently to defend his masculinity.

Akash belongs to the second type: positive and passionate for everything. But somehow he reveals hesitation when he is really needed. To wit, he sometimes is in lack of a sense of responsibility. As a relationship counselor who practices transcultural therapy, Akash leads a different life from his childhood dream of becoming a "brown barrister in white wig overturning the fascist system" (45). He consoles himself with an explanation that what he does now is "an extension of what he was doing before. Empowering the community, but this time, on a personal level" (46). He decides to compromise even though he had ambition; likewise, whether he is conscious of Sunita's fatigue in their marriage or not, he chooses to ignore it. What is ironic is that Akash is good at dealing with others' relationships but fails in his own. In the eyes of Sunita, the former ambitious activist is now a grumpy husband, who pretends to be occupied by his research to avoid communication with his wife. He is willing to listen to patients but entirely oblivious of his wife's feelings, thereby almost destroying his marriage.

Life reaches its climax at the extreme actions of Deepak. In particular, Syal uses the tragedy of the Singh family to foreshadow Deepak's irrational behavior. Out of resentment at the judgment on separation, the husband grasps their children and refuses to return them back to his wife, and eventually burns himself and two sons to death. At the very end of *Life*, Deepak snatches away Chila's baby, too. These male characters seemingly lose their mind and attempt to use force to solve problem and master everything. Singh's and Deepak's extremities debunk machismo which is sometimes enacted as acts of violence against women. In fact, it is more likely that Syal tries to use male characters to justify that sometimes men could be vulnerable as well. Too repressed to voice, men opt to use silence, machismo or even violence to

cover up their powerlessness. Akash's silence and Deepak's kidnapping act are consequences of their helplessness and repression. Conversely, their inability to cope with the distress in life, especially in marriage, highlights the fortitude in women.

Through gender stereotyping in *Life*, Syal delineates the maturity of her heroines. They demonstrate that although South Asian women may be subjugated in some aspects within the ethnic community, they wield certain power yet. Associating South Asian cultural practices with British upbringing, the power becomes a source of strength to tide them over difficult times. Their lives might not go smoothly; yet, they recognize their failure and go through a journey of self-interrogation. After experiencing conflicting dilemmas, self-awareness, and acknowledgement of their failure in lives, they complete both their journey of self-discovery and present a spectrum of South Asian British womanhood. At last, they sense that there is a close bond, which may be sisterhood or motherhood shared by women, letting them voice "an assertion of their rights as human beings and fight for equal treatment" (Hussain 55). As Tania says,

> This time we were all there, mum, Sunita, Chila, holding imaginary hands fighting over Big Mac-sized bindis, sharing headphones to listen in on a tune, running fingertips over fabrics cascading from their bolts like waterfalls. There was no sense avoiding it any more. (*Life* 313-14)

For Syal, all the women eventually unite and life moves on. Life may not be ha ha hee hee, but it always goes on, just like what Tania says after her father's funeral "Go on . . . go!" (*Life* 332). Although she says "go on" to scatter a flock of sparrows and to keep them away from ash spiral of the chimney, she actually urges herself to move on like those sparrows "who fluttered through the grey snow and beyond it, singing their journey as they flew" (332). She knows well that there is always an endless journey waiting ahead. As what Feng has remarked, "an ethnic woman is engaging in an

endless negotiation of her contradictory multiplicity" (*Rethinking the* Bildungsroman, 41). Self-development is surely an ongoing process with no ending point. As life goes on, discovery and interrogation of self will never end.

Chapter Four

Conclusion: "No name is yours, until you speak it"

> [W]e are also the generation that can change things, redefine what being Asian and male or Asian and female means, without losing pride in who we are. Because culture evolves and changes, just like human beings.
>
> — Akash, *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*

This thesis project has drawn upon how Meera Syal, as a South Asian British women writer, pens the negotiations of identities, self-awareness and the process of self-discovery in her two novels *Anita and Me* and *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*. Through the four heroines from the two novels, she not only explores individual awareness and development of self, but also presents a relatively comprehensive spectrum of South Asian womanhood in Britain. As well, these heroines' experiences, to a certain extent, are Syal's autobiographical projections. She writes about South Asian women within Britain but also automatically deals with issues about herself. Through the process of writing, she not merely offers a fictional array of South Asian British womanhood through her characters, but at the same time re-examines her own self-development. Writings become a way of self creation and a proof of her being as a South Asian British female. As Homi K. Bhahba says, "No name is yours, until you speak it" (xxv).

Immigrants from South Asia have been coming to Britain for about as long as the British first sailed to India in the seventeenth century. Over four centuries, people of South Asian descent have been facing shifting attitudes in British society. Their struggles for advancement dramatically turn them from "unwelcome guests" (Fisher xx) into "Asian Cool" (Thandi 198). As Shinder S. Thandi has suggested, the upward

social position is “enthusiastically celebrated by South-Aisan communities themselves and supported by the general British public, which has embrace South-Asian cuisine, music and fashion” (204). Yet, to such a phenomenon, Meera Syal shows her dislike by commenting that, “you’ve got to use being Asian in a way that you want it to be used and not as a stamp of approval” (O’Connell 17; qtd. in Gunning 125). For Syal, being a South Asian is not a tool to gain celebrations of cultural differences and to earn diversities from such an ethnic background. Instead, she obtains her fame as an accomplished novelist, playwright, and an award-winning actress both on stage and on screen to celebrate her ethnicity formed within South Asian community. Regarding Syal’s achievement, Yasmin Hussain praises Meera Syal as “possibly the most influential South Asian woman in the British media” (15). In fact, underneath the success of her career in the British media, what is hidden is her past unhappiness and uncertainty:

> Because I was always the outsider, it forced me to look at the bigger picture, and I think that every creative person is somewhere an outsider . . . you are always having to ask yourself the big questions, like who am I? Where do I fit in? Where do I belong? I realized early on: well, nowhere, actually, but that’s not bad, that’s good.[26]

Syal also admits that she needs to reconcile two very different cultures as those second-generation South Asians do. Facing such a hybridity in identity, she deals with her in-betweenness in a positive way: “That was my gift, not my curse.”[27] Thus, it can be observed that she deflects her lived experiences, including overt racism, disorientated youth and failed marriage, by writing them into her novels. Through storytelling, she constructs a space to express her concerns for South Asian British

[26] It is Syal’s reflection on the racism and isolation she has experienced. Now, she believes all the experiences prove to be salvation. Details about her interview, please see Jonathan Owen.
[27] Please see the Interview with Lydia Slater.

women and also offers them positive and inspiring role models to think of, and learn from.

The second-generation South Asian, as cultural navigators, in fact, exist in a doubly estranged condition. My reading of *Anita and Me* examines how a middle-class South Asian girl, Meena Kumar, reconciles two different cultures in a predominantly white working-class village. Meena's transformation from immaturity to an astute awareness of her in-betweenness in self is a process of self-development. This process, in the end of the story, allows her to become an in-between subject with a rather fluid identity possessing the characteristics of both British white culture and South Asian heritage. Recognizing the advantage and potential of in-betweenness enables Meena to liberate herself from the burdens brought by her cultural backgrounds, further expending her horizons and opening more possibilities in her live. She has moved on at the end of the novel and keeps on moving beyond her white identification and South Asian ethnicity.

Following Syal's changed narrative perspective, my focus shifts to her second novel *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* to inspect how Syal's three grown-up heroines, after undergoing conflicting dilemma and internal struggles, eventually find their voice within South Asian community in Britain. Distinct from Meena's doubly estranged dilemma, the three women are now in a doubly disempowered position. And the double oppression of South Asian adult women in Britain arguably demonstrates that ethnic women in fact suffer more constraints than their male peers do. Rather than elevating her three heroines to a better position directly, Syal depicts them with human flaws. Throughout the novel, the three adult women have been going through a process of self-development and free themselves from patriarchal institution within South Asian community.

Evidently, from *Anita and Me* to *Life*, Syal interweaves her personal and social

experiences within literary works, which accords with Salman Rushdie's saying that writing is a self-validating process (14). Syal never avoids those cultural stereotypes imposed on South Asians. Instead, she even deliberately sets her characters, men and women, to fit these stereotypical images. As she says, it is her in-betweenness that allows her to step back to see a bigger picture of South Asian people in Britain. Syal strategically and intentionally applies gender and racial stereotypes to interrogate both the problems within South Asian community and the false perceptions within the white society. In both writings and performances, she provides the reader and audience a bitter but introspective view on South Asian British womanhood. It is worth stressing that Syal undertakes the exploration and rediscovery of her personal experiences with respect to the impact of South Asian tradition.

In the post-9/11 periods, there has been a worldwide anxiety about the Islamic extremist ideology. And the emergence of home-grown suicide-bombers in July 2005 in London especially shocked the British public. Politicians even have blamed the economic decline since 2008 to the rapid growth of immigrants, who are believed to cause serious social problems, such as unemployment and shortage in housing. Recently, the incumbent Prime Minister David Cameron's speech about the failure of multiculturalism further sets non-white people back to an awkward condition like before.[28] Therefore, through my thesis project, what I want to convey is not merely women's strength to assert their selfhood when faced with conflict and predicaments, but a full picture of how South Asian British women experience uncertainty, self-doubt and finally come to awareness of their inherent strength and value. I hope

[28] "Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream. We have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel want to belong" states David Cameron to claim that state multiculturalism has failed because of the lack of a national idenity for all British to feel belonged to. In this regard, Cameron believes that multiculaturalism is not workable in Britain and they should develop a shared national identity.
Full transcript of Cameron's speech, please see
http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/02/terrorism-islam-ideology

the demonstration of South Asian British women's struggles and awakening can inspire those who are in similar situations to take a positive view toward their difficulties. Obviously, there remains plenty of work to do for the study of minority groups or immigrants in Britain. Even so, I still hope this thesis project has offered certain positive strength to those who are doubly estranged or oppressed.

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