Writing Second-Generation Migrant Identity in Meera Syal’s Fiction

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INTRODUCTION
Through a critical analysis of fictional representations of 1960s—1990s British Asian diasporic communities in Meera Syal’s novels Anita and Me (1996) and Life Isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee (1999), this paper unpacks the significance of the second-generation British Asian youth within these novels, and examines some of the factors contributing to the construction of their identities. Meera Syal stems from a recent generation of young British novelists whose fictions irreverently critique the genuinely multicultural nature of a society that possesses aspects of both East and West on the same soil. Yet the second-generation British Asian youth within these novels are shown to be less concerned with their state of cultural marginalisation than with the material realities of their everyday existence, as they negotiate the tensions between their desires and the expectations of their first-generation parents.

This fictional second generation unwittingly becomes an intermediary between an East and West that occupy the same physical space. Within these novels, well-established British Asian communities in the Midlands and London’s East End fictionally evidence Peter van der Veer’s argument that “non-Western cultures are no longer located outside the West, but form an increasingly important social element of the Western cultural scene itself.” British cultural geography is changing. Meera Syal joins the ranks of those whose fiction is becoming gradually more representative of multicultural/multiracial Britain. Suresht Renjen Bald argues that “in the last two decades, the fiction authored by [migrant] writers has expanded our understanding of the complex negotiations of identity that South Asian migrants and their children engage in every day in a dominantly white Britain.” Although van der Veer points out that “the reading of literary texts as a gateway to the analysis of migrant culture may […] have severe limitations,” Bald identifies the significance of migrant literature in the process of identifying and representing cultural change. Within the novels focused upon in this piece, the

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1 I have adopted Tariq Modood’s definition of genuine multiculturalism, which he describes as “allowing individuals and communities the right to be culturally different from their neighbours and to be understood in their own terms rather than in terms of racist and anti-racist stereotypes.” (Tariq Modood, Not Easy Being British: Colour, Culture and Citizenship (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1992): 6).


British-born children of South Asian migrants are represented as indisputable physical reminders of these cultural changes.

Equally, the host culture and the culture of origin are shown to play a significant part in the construction of the identity of these migrant children, who are both British and Asian, as well as a multi-faceted fusion of the two. These characters provide the physical location for a battle between the East of their parents’ expectations and the West of their everyday realities.

Considering the arguments of Peter van der Veer, Suresht Renjen Bald, Laura Moss, Michael Cox and Sujala Singh, I would like to discuss two of the fictional roles served by the youthful second-generation characters within these novels. I am particularly interested in how Syal uses second-generation youth as literary devices within *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee* and a second-generation child as the narrator in *Anita and Me*.

The dual-cultural positioning of second-generation migrant children renders them useful literary devices for deconstructing various aspects of multicultural/multiracial British society. In his essay, “Art as Technique” (1917), Victor Shklovsky introduced the theory of *defamiliarization* when he argued that “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.”

Shklovsky’s concept provides a tool for identifying the areas in which children and youth are used as fictional literary devices for deconstructing aspects of culture. This conveniently provides the very adult writer Meera Syal with a platform for offering social critiques. Bald argues that “migrants of South Asian origin and their British-born children struggle in different ways to counter their hosts’ constructions of them; but these struggles are limited and structured by the discourses that define them.”

Considering Bald’s argument, I propose that in spite of the efforts made by the fictional migrants and their children within these novels to integrate into the host culture, factors such as traces of colonial guilt, fear of the ‘other’ within and unhelpful social stereotypes all colour the way in which the dominant culture accepts them.

### The Questions

The fictional space of domestic tension between first and second-generation South Asian immigrants to Britain provides a fertile location to begin this discussion of how the identities of the British-born children of immigrants are portrayed as being constructed—and destructed—within the environment of the host culture. Three questions emerge as the discussion evolves.

Firstly, what is the significance of using children, particularly second-generation migrant

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6 Renjen Bald, “Negotiating Identity in the Metropolis”, 86.
children (and youth), as literary devices within these texts? The imagined space of second-generation childhood innocence provides a safe point of reference from which to critique popular critical conceptions of cultural hybridity. These children are represented as not only straddling the fence between British and Asian cultures, but they also fluctuate between childhood innocence and adult knowledge.

Secondly, what is the literary purpose of using a potentially unreliable child as a narrator, or of privileging the child’s point of view within the unfolding texts? Children conveniently provide writers with a platform for addressing dangerous points of view without having to take adult responsibility for expressing these ideas. The British Asian child-narrator arguably serves a powerful function within the postcolonial text, by giving voice to the explosive fusion of the colonized anger of the East with the colonial guilt of the West within the context of a child’s innocence and irresponsibility. The representation of Meena Kumar, the ten-year-old protagonist of Meera Syal’s novel *Anita and Me*, provides a noteworthy example of using a child as such a literary narrative tool.

Finally, what happens when these fictional children cross over the bridge from innocence to experienced adulthood? Of particular interest is the development of the characters of Chila, Sunita and Tania in Syal’s novel *Life Isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee*, as they negotiate their developing second-generation identities. Syal uses these characters to undermine sentimentalized expectations of how ‘nice’ British Asian girls should behave, employing representations that subvert the traditional bildungsroman genre and challenge unhelpful social stereotypes.

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SECOND-GENERATION MIGRANT CHILDREN**

What then is the point of engaging with the fictional second-generation British Asian children and youth within these texts? Franco Moretti argues that “youth acts as a sort of *symbolic concentrate* of the uncertainties of an entire cultural system.”[7] Naïve children can be used to critique and expose moral inconsistencies. If maturity represents a universalism characterized by fixedness and stability, then surely youth represents the fluidity of relativism, in which moral absolutes are weakened by changing circumstances and the vagaries of imperfect human nature.

One of the benefits of inhabiting this fictional hybrid space is the ability to comprehend more than one perspective. This ability to see beyond the immediately visible renders fictional migrant children useful literary tools, not simply as the symbolic voice of the future, but as the present voice of conflict between represented cultures. Michael Cox argues that “child

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observers, untainted by the effects of prolonged enculturation, bring to the narrative forefront those conflicts or core issues […] that arise between and among native and immigrant groups.”8 Following Cox’s logic, the child protagonist can thus be used to introduce and negotiate the tensions arising between the host and original cultures. The mono-culturally white characters within these novels are represented as somewhat lacking in cosmopolitan sophistication. In contrast, these British Asian youth are portrayed as empowered by a cultural hybridity in which centre and margins are radically inverted.

However, the centering of margins does not reflect the defining experience of the fictionally-represented second-generation migrants within these texts. More significant is the representation of the battle of perceptions between what these characters think of as the ‘home’ culture (Britain) and what their parents think of as the ‘home’ culture (nearly always the subcontinent). Peter van der Veer’s argument about the shared physical space of East and West within Britain loses clarity and becomes problematic when Western and non-Western cultures occupy not only the same physical space, but battle within the same physical body. Fictional representations of second-generation British Asians suggest that their lives are characterised by intercultural tensions that are far from celebratory examples of the liberating nature of hybridity.9

East and West battle for primacy within the physical body of Meena Kumar, the feisty ten year old narrator of Anita and Me. She feels both inadequately Indian to please her parents, and inadequately British enough to fit comfortably into her immediate environment.

I knew I was a freak of some kind, too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a Tollington wench, but living in the grey area between all categories felt increasingly like home.10

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, supporting Victor Shklovsky’s assertion that “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’.”11 If fiction is an artistic form of cultural expression that potentially represents varying aspects of society, then I must argue that fictional children and youth, especially those with dual-cultural perspectives, become crucially important literary devices that allow both writers and their readers insight into disparate cultural issues.

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8 Cox, “Interpreters of Cultural Difference”, 120.
9 Such celebratory examples of hybridity can be found in Rushdie’s essays in his collection Imaginary Homelands (London: Granta, 1982), as well as in Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of the ‘Third Space’ (see Bhabha 1990, 1994).
10 Syal, Anita and Me, 149-50.
11 Shklovsky, “Art as Technique”, 20.
THE CHILD AS NARRATOR

An adult writer fictionally portraying a child’s point of view faces the challenge of creating an authorial voice that successfully marries the writer’s adult experiences with the child’s innocent perspective. The tensions inherent in this project prevent its narrative stability. One of the contributing factors to the instability of this fictional narrative space is the power struggle between Meera Syal as an adult writer and Meena Kumar, her child-protagonist, as each battle to become the dominant narrative voice. Meena’s childish hope that “maybe someone from the Big House [will] come out and save me”\(^\text{12}\) is subdued by the adult’s resigned narrative interjection “I realised, sadly, that whoever lived in the Big House would not break their solitude to save a little Indian girl who had been caught telling lies.”\(^\text{13}\) In direct contrast to the notion of the represented child-narrator as inherently unstable, Michael Cox argues that the child’s “naïve point of view provides a perfect complement to […]the] narrator’s fluent voice, which seems to undercut any tendency on the part of readers to draw on ready notions.”\(^\text{14}\) However, Cox’s argument does not take into account the unreliability of the child-narrator, or the subversive potential of this powerful literary tool. The child-narrator’s instinctive, unsophisticated responses to crises within her immediate environment offer a space in which a very adult Syal bluntly interrogates the dominant culture.

Through the irreverent activities and observations of Meena Kumar, this novel challenges the accepted hegemonic ideologies of its social geography and historical situation. Meena immediately identifies herself as an outrageous storyteller, announcing in the preface to *Anita and Me* that “I’m not really a liar, I just learned early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong.”\(^\text{15}\) This alludes to fluidity within the processes of identity construction, in which second-generation children might be tempted to draw from unhelpful but dramatically exciting stereotypes to assert themselves as representing more than the simple sum of their cultural parts. Clearly, within the working-class 1960s environment of the fictional Midlands town Tollington, any visible signifiers of class/race/educational differences are likely to prohibit the seamless integration of an Indian immigrant family into the pre-existing social fabric. With her child’s perspective, Meena is portrayed as incapable of locating her otherness within the larger cultural context of an inherently racist corner of 1960s Britain.

Syal deliberately chooses to engage a child’s point of view as a literary tool. She thus allows herself to shed the authorial inhibitions that enable a polite sidestepping of awkward

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^{13}\) Syal, *Anita and Me*, 15.
^{14}\) Cox, “Interpreters of Cultural Difference”, 122.
^{15}\) Syal, *Anita and Me*, 10.
social issues. These include portrayals of violent racist attacks perpetrated by well-known members of the local community, and portrayals of the effects of abuse within broken homes. That *Anita and Me* falls within the bildungsroman tradition is clear by the transformative nature of the text. Meena as the child-narrator unknowingly documents her own development from naïve child to cynical adolescent. Roger Bromley argues that

*Anita and Me*, like so many semi-autobiographical first novels, is an initiation narrative, a rite of passage and transition from the rural idyll of an eternal summer perspective to the dark and conflicted experience of a racialised and sexualised world.16

Meena’s disturbing glimpse at the evidence of childhood sexual abuse within her neighbourhood forces her from childhood innocence into the murky world of adult knowledge, before she has the tools to cope with the understanding of what she has seen. “I wished I had not seen what I was sure I had seen, the row of bruises around Tracey’s thighs, as purple as the clover heads, two bizarre bracelets perfectly mimicking the imprint of ten cruel, angry fingers.”17 I read this as an authorial critique of the violence imposed on those who are without agency, such as children who do not yet have the cultural or linguistic referents to fully comprehend the implications of adult activities. That the results of such dreadful events are witnessed by a second-generation child heightens the implications, as such an incident inevitably represents the host culture as inherently flawed. This serves as a catalyst to propel Meena into acknowledging and developing the more Asian aspects of her developing second-generation identity.

Michael Cox describes how “children allow the author to make the familiar unfamiliar, whether through sensory experience, deductive analysis, or the phrase that jolts a Pollyanna from living in an illusory world.” In a critique of the patronizing racism that categorizes so many of the Kumar’s experiences within the fictional Tollington community, Syal employs the shock tactic of an unwelcome epiphanic moment to thrust the child-narrator into a direct confrontation with the enemy. This moment comes for Meena when a local shopkeeper, hyperactive in the village church, announces that

‘We’re having a collection [for Africa]. They asked for a plough but we thought a few tins and preserves would tide them over for a bit.’ You could see it in his face, he’d made the connection, Africa was abroad, we were from abroad, how could we refuse to come along and embrace Jesus for the sake of our cousins?18

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17 Syal, *Anita and Me*, 142.
With such a realization that despite her best efforts, her external self is perceived to be other than British, the identity that Meena has so successfully carved out for herself in her own imagination crumbles. In a leap from child-narrator to adult author, Meena describes how “the next morning, the cracks appeared which would finally split open the china blue bowl of that last summer.”

Meena acts as a constant physical reminder within the text of the embodied voice of the new hybrid generation. She stems from a fictional second-generation educated out of submissively accepting the status quo. Her noisy, unreliable narration allows readers an insight into not only cultural and ethnic tensions, but also introduces the issue of class into the text. When Meena confronts the local bully Sam Lowbridge after a racist attack on a local Indian bank manager, she insists

‘I know you did it. I am the others, Sam. You did mean me.’ […] Sam gripped my wrists tighter for support. ‘You’ve always been the best wench in Tollington […] but you was gonna look at me, yow won’t be staying will ya? You can move on. How come? How come I can’t?’

The recognition that class and education would enable the Kumar family to move away from the provincialness of Tollington empowers Meena to confront the inconsistencies of local prejudice. Tollington is portrayed as possessing an ability to unproblematically separate a racial hatred aimed at ‘outsiders’ from a local affection for the Kumar family, as is evidenced in Sandy’s remarks, “You’re so lovely. You know, I never think of you as, you know, foreign. You’re just like one of us.” Within her developing maturity, Meena begins to see the racist implications of such remarks.

Meena’s growing sociocultural awareness provides a useful fictional platform for highlighting the struggle of second-generation British Asian children, as they navigate the space between the traditional community-based life of their parents and the possibility of an independent, self-determined life within mainstream British culture. Irvin Schick argues that narration itself

Is a carrier of meaning, the channel through which an individual tells him/herself and others the tale of his/her place in the world […] Human beings are social creatures, and from early childhood onward, narratives are an intrinsic part of their communal existence.

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19 Syal, Anita and Me, 274-75.
20 Syal, Anita and Me, 314.
21 Syal, Anita and Me, 29.
This infers that narrative is an ongoing, lifelong activity through which individuals communicate both internally and externally the path of their identity construction. Narratives are the means through which writers construct fictional identities for a variety of characters, and through which they can either support or question cultural norms. In a direct challenge to outdated colonial notions of Anglo-British superiority, it is the South Asian migrants to the traditionally white community who bring signifiers of civilization (education, knowledge of the world outside Tollington, fluency in other languages) to the village. Yet for the child-narrator, political correctness and social liberalism are unknown quantities. This is especially apparent when the text introduces and contends with uncomfortable issues such as racist attacks and domestic violence, which are skirted around by the adult characters within the novel.

Through engaging a child’s point of view as a literary tool, Syal allows herself to shed the authorial inhibitions that enable a polite sidestepping of awkward social issues. For example, Meena and her visiting, non English-speaking Nanima are told by a local villager that he “served in India. Ten Years. Magical country. Magical people. The best.” Meena’s instant response is a quietly muttered “Shouldn’t have bloody been there anyway, should you?” Although *Anita and Me* is not marketed as a postcolonial novel, retorts such as Meena’s provide as an adult writer with the opportunity of bluntly interrogating the cultural ignorance of westerners who consider Indian and Indian culture as something to be consumed.

Meena is not restrained by the courteous survival techniques that enable adults to live in conjunction with those they find objectionable. By using a fictional child to express emotions and actions rational adults cannot, Syal privileges a child’s point of view to directly address such issues as violent racism, well-intentioned ignorance and economic hardship. Mrs Kumar informs her daughter that

‘We will never be rich, Meena, we’re too honest. But we will always have enough to buy all the important things, food, heat, a car...’

I began to switch off. I did not want mama to remind me of all the things for which I had to be eternally vigilant and grateful, I wanted us to have enough money so that we could be selfish, ungrateful, and spoil ourselves shamelessly without having to do rapid sums in our heads as if we were permanently queuing at some huge check-out till.

Such angry outbursts are allowed of children, who have not yet learned the social niceties that curb vitriolic speech. Yet this furious diatribe would be largely unthinkable for a mature adult, especially a first-generation migrant who had sacrificed so much to come to Britain. Meena

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23 Syal, *Anita and Me*, 222.
24 Syal, *Anita and Me*, 262.
rejects the reminders of their status as ‘others’ within the community who value the migrant’s dreams of adequate food, shelter, work and transportation. As a child-narrator, Meena provides the author with a platform for highlighting the discrepancies between migrant expectations and the realities of their lives within the larger dominant culture. In her role as prime authorial voice, Meena becomes not only the omniscient narrator, but introduces the concept of these second-generation fictional youth functioning as unwitting translators between cultures.

FROM ADOLESCENCE INTO MATURITY
What are the implications, then, of the shift from child-narrator to an adolescent-narrator, and finally, to the narrative point of view of a young adult? Does this shift to a mature point of view sever the text from the traditional genre of bildungsroman, as the child-protagonist comes to the end of his struggle between innocence and experience? I have so far discussed the usefulness of children as literary devices within the novel, particularly as narrator. Life Isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee presents an altogether different approach to the genre of what Mark Stein has called “the black British novel of transformation.” Syal’s second novel is firmly ensconced within a fictional British Asian community in East London, where the battles are more intergenerational than intercultural. Syal has arguably written a ‘triple’ bildungsroman that clearly rebels against accepted literary notions of focusing on the development of a single character from childhood through to adulthood. Not only does Syal offer equal treatment to the characterization of her three protagonists, but she very elegantly manages to shift authorial voice from amongst the three young women, lending a surprising maturity to a narrative focusing primarily on the agonies of the shift from adolescence to young adulthood.

Life Isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee privileges the ‘everyday’ cultural hybridity of second-generation youth as the location for rebellion against the status quo. The British Asian children of migrants within this text clearly exemplify what Sujala Singh has identified in her article “Postcolonial Children” as “the representation of youth as a signifier for the unstable, dynamic times” in 1970s-1980s Britain. This novel focuses on the social and personal consequences when the children of first-generation Indian immigrants are portrayed as growing up and away from their childhood community. In a moment of poignant self-reflection, one of the principal characters

suddenly remembered why she had stopped attending community events [...] She could not take the proximity of everything any more. The endless questions of who what why she was, to whom she belonged (father/husband/workplace), why her life wasn’t

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25 For a further discussion of Stein’s ‘novels of transformation’, see his recent text Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation (Columbus: Ohio State P, 2004).
following the ordained patterns for a woman of her age, religion, height and income bracket. The sheer effrontery of her people, wanting to be inside her head, to own her, claim her, preserve her.27

By separating herself from the relentless flow of events within her community, this character distances herself from the specific activities that force her to confront her Asianness. Within the characterization of Tania, our reactions as mature adult readers are gently manipulated by the use of defamiliarization as a distancing mechanism that separates adult logic from childlike emotional reactions. Shklovsky argued that he saw “texts’ representations of reality as a technique for defamiliarizing the social ideas of the dominant culture, and thus for challenging our automatic acceptance of these ideas.”28 Such literary devices are useful for identifying the boundaries of the status quo, in order to facilitate social critiques of the British Asian community represented within this novel.

Considering Michael Cox’s use of Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization, this section considers how Life Isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee provides a platform for its second-generation youth – specifically the character of Tania – to defamiliarize and critique inconsistencies within the British Asian community. The confusions of cultural identity focus the themes of this novel, which cover the broad class/race/gender spectrum, but always with Syal’s trademark humour. Like the British bhangra music that “had come to them on bootleg tapes during [their] teen years,”29 the chaotic youth of the three protagonists threatens to undermine the carefully preserved Indian culture their parents had ironically sacrificed and then attempted to rebuild, in order to make a better life for their children.

The drums they knew, their parents’ heartbeat, folk songs sung in sitting rooms, the pulse of hundreds of family weddings, but then the guitars, cold steel and concrete […] the frustration bouncing off walls in terraced houses in Handsworth, hurried cigarettes out of bathroom windows, secret assignations in libraries, hurrying home with a mouthful of fear and desire. The lyrics parodied I Love You Love Me Hindi film crooning, but with subtle, bitter twists, voices coming up from the area between what was expected of kids like them and what they were really up to.30

Bhangra and guilt are symbolically woven together in this passage, representing the intercultural tensions that attend cultural hybridity. The knowledge that their parents sacrificed established lives on the subcontinent to build a new and better life in an unwelcoming Britain for their future children weighs heavily on these characters. They represent the future of a

28 Shklovsky as cited in Cox, “Interpreters of Cultural Difference”, 130.
30 Syal, LIAHHHHH, 41(italics mine).
rapidly shifting culture in which Asianness will be recognized by the mainstream British population as slowly catching up with whiteness as a core aspect of British identity.

The three central characters arguably represent a ‘trinary’ opposition of content/depressed/alienated. These might appear at first to be overused stereotypes of South Asian females, but Syal commandeers these characterizations as literary devices for critiquing the expectations of 1980s British culture. Chila is the traditionally ‘Asian’ British Asian girl, the “plump darkie with the shy stammer” who shocked them all “by bagging not only a groom with his own teeth, hair, degree and house, but the most eligible bachelor within a twenty-mile radius.” With a high threshold for disappointment grounded in her mother’s oddly sane advice not to expect too much from life, Chila’s contentment critiques both individualism and consumer frenzy within the novel. Syal arguably uses Chila as a class referent, to critique the snobbery inherent within self-conscious migrant communities. Within such communities is often an uncertainty of one’s social position within a culture that often mistakes non-white skins as an indication of either inherent inferiority or spiritual superiority.

I reckon […] he was more than 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 sequinned tracksuits and spend one morning a week helping with their husbands’ businesses and the rest of the time doing interesting charity events like Bhangra Nights for Bengali Flood Victims and posh dinners for Famine Relief.

Chila’s honesty and complete lack of self-consciousness can be read as a dominant moral anchor within the text. Yet Syal stubbornly avoids sentimentalising Chila.

In a powerful textual glimpse into reverse prejudice, Syal uses a second-generation character to critique what Graham Huggan identifies as ‘the postcolonial exotic’. With just a brief comment from Chila, Syal confronts this tendency to romanticise and commodify the East as a luxury product that exists for the benefit of western consumers. “Loove your outfit, by the way. This stuff is really in at the mo. Is it DKNY? Chila looked down for a moment. ‘No, Bimla’s Bargains, Forest Gate, I think.’” Syal refuses to fall into the trap of romanticising the ‘content’ contingent of this ‘trinary’ relationship. Chila is portrayed as unselfconsciously ironic throughout the narrative, which eventually reveals her to be neither as thick nor as nice as had been previously intimated by the progression of events within the text.

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31 Syal, LIAHHHH, 12.
32 Syal, LIAHHHH, 33.
33 For a detailed account of this phenomenon, see Graham Huggan’s groundbreaking study The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins (London: Routledge, 2001).
34 Syal, LIAHHHH, 53.
It’s a good job that I’m thick, I reckon, because my world is small, tidy and hovered and I like that […] So I got myself the job at Leos on the check-out […] and I was good at it. I’m good with people […] especially the old Indian ladies who know I’ll let them prod the aubergines for freshness without glaring at them and chat to them in Punjabi or Swahili […] All life is in that supermarket […] and […] I knew I’d found my place.  

That conversational fluency in three languages should be considered an outstanding achievement in any circle appears to be lost on Chila, who is comfortable with a self-constructed identity characterized more by flunking out of school than by her extraordinary cultural savvy. Although at first Chila appears to represent the most traditional – and the most mature – element within the second-generation characters within Life Isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee, she becomes by the last chapter the most radical.

By contrast, Sunita is portrayed as a vibrant, angry political activist who conveniently delineates the boundaries of the expected status quo for ‘nice’ British Asian girls by her rebellious verbal tirades against Asian men who, for revenge, spend their time pursuing and “shagging the women of [the] oppressors.” Suresht Renjen Bald’s previously mentioned assertion that British Asians are engaged in a struggle to counter British constructions of their identity is clearly portrayed as an episode that reveals a crucial incident in the formation of Sunita’s own identity.

I’d had one boyfriend before […] but I got bored with having to explain stuff all the time. How come my parents came over here? What was the dot on the forehead? Why was my skin so beautiful? I felt like his social worker, not his girlfriend.

This incident specifically outlined for Sunita the cultural stereotype she loathed – the interpreter of cultural difference. She wholeheartedly rejects the notion of a socially-constructed identity in which (in the words of Connelly) “my identity is what I am and how I am recognised rather than what I choose, want or consent to.” In her blatant rejection of this ‘exoticised’ educative role of societally-prescribed ‘Asianness’, Sunita instead employs her hard-won agency and chooses a path that horrifies the first generation. She becomes angry and bitter, questioning conservative adult authority and rejecting the traditional path of marriage and children.

Yet the ease with which Sunita gives up her law studies, protest marches and Doc Martens for a shalwar kameez that resembles a “map of motherhood, marked by handprints, chocolate streaks and a recent vomit stain which bloomed from her breast like some damp crusty
flower”\textsuperscript{39} is understandably problematic. Throughout the narrative, Sunita’s character provides a critique of marriage and of the ‘good’ behaviour expected of second-generation British Asian girls.

Four weeks before my finals was not the ideal time to blow both our grants on a quiet visit to a suburban clinic. Yellow wallpaper. Isn’t that the title of a book? It’s what I remember most about that place. That and the gas mask coming down like a slap […].

If you can’t be good, be careful. My old village neighbour trilled that at us as we trooped off to school. I didn’t manage either, did I?\textsuperscript{40}

This reference to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1890) locates Syal’s interrogation of the ‘normality’ of patriarchal domesticity in a society where young women are meant to have both choice and agency. Regardless of the rebellion of the youthful second generation, over time they become nearly as traditional as the first generation. As the ‘depressed’ contingent of the ‘trinary’ model of opposing factors within Syal’s narrative, Sunita arguably serves primarily as a contrast to Chila. Sunita introduces tension in order to explode the accepted notion of the passivity of South Asian females.

In an attack on the exploitation of the ‘exoticised’ cultural hybridity of British Asian girls, Syal introduces the Tania character. Tania appears to be a self-sufficient career girl who is shown to function independently of her British Asian roots. Yet in true Machiavellian fashion, she conveniently calls upon the cultural marketability of her ethnic heritage whenever it suits. Searching for that cutting-edge subject that will make her reputation as an ‘ethnic’ filmmaker, “she scrolled through her proposal ideas: the new Asian underground music scene, the Harley Street scam in replacement hymen surgery for Asian and Saudi women, the balti kings of Birmingham.”\textsuperscript{41} The representation of Tania’s character as a second-generation filmmaker ironically facilitates her central textual role: that of an objective witness to the inconsistencies within the British Asian community from which she stems. By making an unsentimental documentary film about marriage that unflatteringly features her best friends’ seemingly solid relationships, Tania alienates herself from the very support network she will most need when crisis hits: her own second-generation friends who have known and loved her since childhood.

Tania herself takes on the characteristics of a symbolic film camera, as she unemotionally documents without any sense of community loyalty the contradictory nature of a hybrid culture. This clearly reflects Victor Shklovsky’s premise that “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to

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\item \textsuperscript{39} Syal, LIAHHHH, 14.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Syal, LIAHHHH, 88.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Syal, LIAHHHH, 61.
\end{itemize}
make objects ‘unfamiliar’. Through her film, Tania becomes a defamiliarized narrator, used by Meera Syal as a literary tool for unsentimentally deconstructing painful discrepancies within the represented life experiences of contemporary second-generation British Asians.

**CONCLUSION**

That second-generation British Asian migrant youngsters occupy such central textual roles within these two novels indicates the usefulness of such socially and culturally hybrid characters as literary tools. Their dual-cultural perspectives offer myriad possibilities for defamiliarizing unflattering aspects of both the dominant and the immigrant cultures. In addition, their lack of mature, adult perspective affords their creators a socially acceptable forum for critiquing the (often racist) dominantly white cultural hegemony. Representations of second-generation youth within these novels deconstruct the idealistic notion of the fluidity of their developing sociocultural identities, highlighted by the racist stasis of a dominantly white fictional Britain. These novels shift the focus from a concern with national identity into a space of what Laura Moss calls an ‘everyday hybridity’, in which the concerns of the individual – in a childish way – take precedence over the larger concerns of the migrant community. This fictional hybridity arguably suggests a greater strength in adapting to the host culture than in attempting to maintain the vestiges of an impossibly pure original culture within an alien environment.

Yet from these novels, it is clear that the arena for struggle has dramatically shifted from a simple cultural binary of ‘insider / outsider’ to a far more complex yet far more mundane ‘us’. It is the youth within these novels that carry the burden of anthropomorphizing these changes. It is interesting to note that Tollington, the fictional location of *Anita and Me*, does not appear to shift in any way; rather, it is Meena Kumar herself who develops a new sense of self and of the privileges of her British and Indian dual heritage. Of the trio of protagonists within *Life Isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee*, it is only Tania whose Indianness becomes the key to her epiphanic identity crisis. Within each of these characterizations, it is clear that the social concerns have shifted from the global to the local. Both novels at first glance appear to fall neatly within the bildungsroman genre. However, I have argued that *Life Isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee* demonstrates Meera Syal’s rebellion against the genre. This novel not only introduces three equally important protagonists, but more importantly, it breaks through the glass age ceiling of adolescence, as these children are not preserved in their early teens, but revolt by growing up. *Anita and Me* and *Life Isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee* represent a quietly subversive new path for

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42 Shklovsky, “Art as Technique”, 20.
British literature. These novels not only interrogate British society, but significantly contribute to fictional discussions of the contemporary nature of postcolonial Britishness.

**Works Cited**


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