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Lives and Lies

Wendy-Marie Aylward

Most children are taught from the moment they begin speaking that lying is bad and that if somebody asks a question, the answer should be the truth. But it has long since been recognized that “truth” and “lie” cannot be easily defined as absolutes, and that most matters fall somewhere in between. Meena Kumar from Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* has mastered this grey area, shaping the truth to suit her needs. In this novel, a lie isn’t simply a young girl denying that she stole from her mother’s purse; it is the twisting of reality, self-deception, and the telling and imagining of half-truths that warp Meena’s view of the world. Meena, who is caught between the shame of an Indian heritage and the desire to be truly British, seeks to change the life she has through these deceptions. Her journey towards self-acceptance is reflected in the changing nature of her lies, as she ultimately arrives at a different truth about her friends and her Indian heritage.

Meena deceives herself through the idealization of others’ lives, perceiving them as filled with excitement and failing to recognize the sorrow they feel. When Meena sees the “gippos,” as Anita’s mother calls them, she is fascinated by their lifestyle, imagining “how romantic it must be to just climb in and move off once boredom or routine set in” (Syal, 1997, p. 102). She doesn’t realize the implications of what she sees—the “pin-thin children,” the “tired, washed-out woman... inhaling deeply on a cigarette,” which reveal a life of struggle and strife (Syal, 1997, p. 102). Similarly, she reacts to her family’s reminiscence of the past with oblivious insensitivity. When Meena remembers her mother’s rickshaw story of a man being stabbed in the face, she is affected only by the “meeting of two worlds, the collision of the epic with the banal” (Syal, 1997, p. 36). Whilst her father grapples with the thought that he might be responsible for someone’s death, Meena sighs along only at the thought that her father had planted a “real live bomb” (Syal, 1997, p. 76). One might believe that Meena is truly disturbed for a moment by her family’s history as she hides in the darkened stairwell eavesdropping on

her Aunties’ and Uncles’ stories from a violent past. Hearing those stories she feels her “heart...trying to break out of [her] chest,” and her sleep that night is “full of blood red trains screaming through empty stations, scattering severed limbs as it whistled past” (Syal, 1997, pp. 74-75). Meena comes to realize that the past she has listened to is a “murky bottomless pool full of monsters...with a deceptively still surface and a deadly undercurrent” (Syal, 1997, p. 75). Yet she is not touched by the horror of the stories she hears, but rather by the thought of their existence, and is terrified that “I would be discovered and they would clam up and deny me more” (Syal, 1997, p. 74). In the end, her concern is not with the pain that her family has felt but with her own ability to cope with the enormity of what she has heard. Most astonishing is her reaction to meeting Mr. Worrall, a man essentially erased and reduced to a motionless moaning figure as a result of the violence of war, who functions as real evidence of what comes from Meena’s desired “epic” life. “Now I [know] two war veterans” is the first thing she thinks, followed by a feeling of annoyance that her papa “had not done anything as remotely exciting or dangerous in his youth” (Syal, 1997, p. 66). Thus she sees only the possibilities, the beauty, the adventure, and the glamor in these imagined realities, blind to the sorrow that pervades many of the stories that enthrall her.

Meena takes this idealization of others’ lives one step further into the realm of fantasy and complete fabrication, imagining a dramatized “other life” that she cannot see and will never experience for herself. Her own parents’ lives are a source of inspiration for young Meena, their past almost like a myth that has lost its magic. She fantasizes about what her life could have been if her father had gone into film and becomes “obsessed with what [she] had missed out on, being the daughter of a famous film hero” (Syal, 1997, p. 82). Meena pictures her mama “singing the song to the wind as she cycled back from her all-girls college...duty and desire already at war for her future” (Syal, 1997, p. 111). Even her loud and plump Auntie



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Shaila becomes “pencil-thin in her chic chiffon suit” as she saunters through one of the largest commercial centers in New Delhi, “pretending not to notice, but knowing for certain, that every eye was upon her” (Syal, 1997, p. 111). At times Meena becomes bitter with jealousy about these imagined other lives, as with Anita Rutter’s plans to live in a London flat with Sherrie. She conjures an extravagant and impossible image of the two looking out of their penthouse to see “Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, the Houses of Parliament and several theatres” all in one view (Syal, 1997, p. 99). Meena completely ignores reality, conveniently rearranging the world to suit her desires. I believe it is an overpowering sense of yearning for an unattainable identity that leads Meena to lie and embellish upon the details of her life.

Meena draws inspiration from the thought of being someone else, leading her to create a persona for herself fashioned after the individual whom she finds most exciting and intriguing—Anita Rutter. Meena believes Anita is a girl whose father has been in the Navy and who dares talk back to an adults, and this makes her the perfect combination of adventure and shameless audacity for Meena to emulate. She seems unreal and unreachable, at one point compared to the Cheshire Cat of *Alice in Wonderland*, an often sarcastic character with a disregard for rules and a brazen, decisive way of speaking. Meena looks to Anita to tell her which path she ought to take, just as Alice looks for guidance from the Cheshire Cat. Such an allusion to *Alice in Wonderland* may also imply that Meena, like Alice, is a young girl who does not care which way she goes or who she becomes, so long as she ends up someone very different from who she is now. So Meena chooses the path towards becoming Anita, “the ‘cock’ of the yard,” (Syal, 1997, pp. 38-39) far removed from the “pleasant, helpful, delicate” little Indian girl she is expected to be (Syal, 1997, p. 149). Anita’s flair for the dramatic is what draws Meena to her, and she pounces on the first chance she has to link herself to Anita. Upon the discovery of Mrs. Christmas’s death, Meena immediately concludes and she and Anita are “murderers...joined in sin,” effectively connecting the two (Syal, 1997, p. 78).

With this, Meena embarks on a journey to transform herself into Anita through imitation. Each time she pretends to know what Anita knows, such as what a

virgin is, or what it means to want to “shag the arse” off of something, she creates an image of herself that is more like Anita. She wears the mask of Anita when she applies her mother’s lipstick, a “glaring cerise grin...seemingly hovering above [her face] like the Cheshire Cat smile,” (Syal, 1997, p. 107) the same “Cheshire Cat’s smile” she later goes chasing after, as Anita disappears into the grounds of the Big House (Syal, 1997, p. 124). One might suggest that Meena is wearing her mother’s make-up and therefore imitating her mother, not Anita. However, I think it is far more significant that Meena ventures to try on her mother’s makeup after hearing Anita complain about how she couldn’t get into her own mother’s stash of makeup, as well as watching Anita and her friends fuss over their faces of eye-shadow, blush, and lip gloss. Soon, Anita and Meena become “officially ‘mates,’” (Syal, 1997, p. 135) strolling around together every day, “always aware that we were simply too big and beautiful for Tollington” (Syal, 1997, p. 134). At this point Meena takes on that role of “posturing and looking mean” just as she has seen Anita do countless times before, knowing that she looks the part of a tough Tollington wench as opposed to a sweet Indian girl (Syal, 1997, p. 136). However, it is still a façade, as she remains in awe of Anita and is only projecting an image of her desired self. It is when Meena turns on her own family and cuts those ties that she completes the transformation and becomes the “Anita” she has always wanted to be.

The pinnacle of this transformation, when she effectively realizes her ideal persona and gains Anita’s acceptance, is Meena’s shameless manipulation of her “cousins,” Pinky and Baby. Meena’s attitude from the moment she is left alone with her cousins shifts instantly into the standard disdain required of her new identity, and while she does intimidate them into silence, she isn’t entirely malicious either. However, this quickly changes when Meena decides to steal the charity money in Mr. Ormerod’s shop, as she directly threatens Baby with, “Yow say anything, and yow’m dead” (Syal, 1997, p. 155). Though this is not the first time she steals, as she has stolen from her parents many times before, it is the first time she bullies another person into doing what she wants them to do in order to achieve her goal. She has seen Anita exert the same power over Sherrie and Fat Sallie—playing one girl against the other to compete for her favor—

as well as the members of the “Wenches Brigade,” especially against Tracy during the pissing competition when she pushes her weaker younger sister into pulling down her trousers (Syal, 1997, p. 138). It is this same ruthless coercion that Meena turns on Baby and Pinky, manipulating them into remaining silent about the theft even long after it happens. It is then, when Anita softly tells Meena, “You’re a real Wench,” when Meena gains Anita’s approval and recognition of Meena as her “joint leader,” when she finally earns her Wench Wings “without even trying,” that Meena’s transformation is complete (Syal, 1997, p. 156). Not only has she turned against her own family and proven herself as Anita’s equal, but she also feels no guilt over her actions (Syal, 1997). She claims that she does not know she has broken free of, but I think that at that moment what she breaks free of is the mold of her old life, the “Meena beti” she was before. She feels free and unfettered and unbelievably thrilled.

Yet if this fulfillment is what truly brings her happiness, this “breaking free” of an old identity to effectively become an entirely new person, why doesn’t the novel end there? I would suggest that this is because *Anita and Me* is an exemplary *bildungsroman*, which, according to Berthold Schoene-Harwood (1999), “insist[s] on the narrative consistency of their characters, suggesting that, whilst they grow and evolve, they do not in fact change, but remain essentially identical with whom they were at the outset and will be in conclusion” (p. 1). For the first part of this novel, Meena devotes her energies to becoming someone different from her family and their expectations. Yet once she achieves her dream of becoming a true Tollington Wench, accepted by her British peers, she begins to defend the part of herself which she previously rejected. I wouldn’t argue that Meena, after all her experiences, does not grow and change in any way, however; she comes to accept all parts of herself and embraces the identity she had from the moment she was born, which, “for the first time ever, fitted me to perfection and was all mine” (Syal, 1997, p. 326). This process is supported by Maria Lima (1993), who asserts that “post-colonial writers have used the *bildungsroman* as a way ... to explore precisely the complexities and contradictions of growing up in a region where (post)colonial and racial relationships” are at play (p. 440). At 10 years old, Meena is the

person she’s yearned to be for many years, but she is still not happy with who she is, the Black British girl with an Indian heritage. She does, however, come to love herself and her family as she has never done before, and this second transformation into a confident “Meena” who is happy to be herself is reflected in the changing nature of her lies.

Up until this point, Meena’s lies have been largely in pursuit of creating a new persona for herself, but once she achieves that goal, they change to a method of defense for herself and her family. When Mr. Ormerod comes to her home to reclaim the tin charity box, she uses a lie to protect herself from the wrath of her father, unthinkingly blaming the theft on Baby. Once again, this is not the first time Meena lies, but as with Meena’s previous thefts, nobody had been hurt because of her stubborn lies and fanciful thinking. This is the first time Meena deviates from the lies she uses to change herself since she begins imitating Anita’s persona. It is a selfish lie—one told with the intention of covering up her crime regardless of the innocents who might suffer because of it—but it is a lie of defense. However, as Meena begins to grow and learn to empathize with other individuals, her deceptions begin to come to the defense of, quite significantly, the members of her family. Meena struggles with facing judgment and prejudice towards her Indian heritage throughout her life, such as in school when they “do” India. So when she sees Anita judging her parents at their own dinner table, she leaps to their defense with a blatant lie, determined not to let Anita “play the same games with my parents that had made me dizzy and confused” (Syal, 1997, p. 255).

Meena not only uses lies to protect her parents from other people’s judgment but also uses them to lessen the burden she places upon her family. She could have told her parents the truth about how and why she broke her leg from riding Trixie, yet she only tells them that she had “fallen awkwardly,” minimizing the event rather than milking it for all it’s worth and using the event to add excitement to her life as she would have before (Syal, 1997, p. 284). She later reflects, “I was a grown-up now, I had seen my parents swallow down anger and grief a million times, for our sakes” (Syal, 1997, p. 288). She returns this favor when she pretends not to be upset by her Nanima’s departure, upon which she reflects, “It was not so hard to do, this sacrificial lark” (Syal, 1997, p. 288). She pretends

like this once before—before she becomes best mates with Anita—when, reeling with the hatred expressed against her, she decides not to tell her papa about the old lady who calls her a “bloody stupid wog” once she sees on her father’s face the countless times he had protected her from that same truth (Syal, 1997, p. 97). This, in my opinion, is in following with the generic conventions of the bildungsroman, reinforcing the idea that Meena at the end of the novel is essentially the same person she is at the beginning; she only needs to go through struggle and change to learn to be happy with herself and her life.

With the realization of her desired persona, Meena comes to see herself and others from a realistic perspective, and finally learns that she does not need to live a lie to be happy. Finally at the top of the hierarchy alongside Anita, where she thought she’d be happier, Meena comes to see the people she once feared and adored as they really are. Deirdre, whose expression of “dark, knowing hunger” (Syal, 1997, p. 55) always terrified Meena, loses her menace when Meena recognizes “something unexpected in her face—she was frightened of us” (Syal, 1997, p. 215). No longer fighting to become Anita’s equal, she is able to see some of the power she and her family possess in their own right, like a million brightly shining stars clear in the night sky without the light of the sun to drown them out. Similarly, she loses her awe and devotion to Anita once she is able to see her on equal ground, realizing that Anita is no more than a girl herself whose own wishful thinking prevents her from seeing through her mother’s false promises. Meena even takes it one step further when she entertains the thought that it is Anita who needs her, stepping over the “fine line between love and pity” to completely reverse their roles in her mind (Syal, 1997, p. 242). Meena is finally able to see the hollow and contrived nature of her past fantasies when she strips “Sam the Hero” of his glory to reveal “Sam the Drunk...Sam the Idiot...Sam the...” (Syal, 1997, p. 311). She cannot bring herself to think that Sam’s cavalier treatment of girls could indicate something far worse. Beyond letting go of her old, elaborately crafted illusions, Meena also learns that the “drama and excitement” she has prayed for so fervently are linked to real pain and sorrow, and that “change always strolled hand in hand with loss” (Syal, 1997, p. 197). In that new state of thinking it is unlikely that

she will still yearn to hear more of her Aunties’ and Uncles’ stories of Partition as she did hiding in the darkened stairwell a lifetime ago.

The coming of Meena’s Nanima, along with Meena’s disillusionment, is key to helping Meena come to terms with her own situation in life. Before Nanima, all the stories Meena had heard were abstract and distant; seeing her grandmother in the flesh serves to solidify those accounts of India and give them personal shape and substance. Nanima’s own stories take on more weight when one considers that all the other stories Meena had heard were treated as taboo by her mother, given as a precious “gift” by her father, or secretly stolen from her Aunties and Uncles; Nanima instead chooses to recall her experiences in India unabashedly in loud Punjabi, not as story but as fact. “They all put mama’s rickshaw story and papa’s unexploded bomb into kind of context for me,” Meena reflects, as she realizes from hearing Nanima’s anecdotes that she is not witnessing a grand adventure, but simply life as it was—as regular as falling off a horse or ending up in a hospital (Syal, 1997, p. 211). In the end, she comes to accept the truth as “enough excitement for a lifetime already” (Syal, 1997, p. 303).

Witnessing Nanima’s loud and unabashed ownership of India’s history also pushes Meena to realize her own previous feeling of shame about her heritage when she “did” India in school, specifically the Black Hole of Calcutta. The “Black Hole of Calcutta” refers to an event in India where Indian troops captured a post held by the Dutch East India Trading Company. A captured soldier by the name of Holwell (1764) described it as “a hundred and forty-six wretches... crammed together in a cube of about eighteen feet, in a close sultry night, in Bengal” (p. 258). This version of the story, according to Bruce Heydt (2003), “enjoyed widespread acceptance” for more than 150 years (p. 15). It wasn’t until 1959, less than a decade before the time the novel takes place, that author Brijen Gupta revealed that the number of people captured was “about 64 and the number of survivors was 21,” (Heydt, 2003, p. 15) as opposed to the originally reported 146 people with 23 survivors. This kind of history, paired with images of “angry unruly mobs, howling like animals for the blood of the brave besieged British” found in Meena’s textbooks, weighs down on Meena for most of her life, driv-

ing her to reinvent herself (Syal, 1997, p. 211). Now, with Nanima, she is able to let go of that shame, and feel how “for the first time [she] desperately wanted to visit India and claim some of [that] magic” (Syal, 1997, p. 211). As Meena comes to love and accept her Indian heritage, she no longer needs the crutch of lies and fabrication to create a desired alternate persona. She is able to find satisfaction in her own identity.

Meena Kumar presents a complex character who transitions from envying the lives and fabricated lies of other people, to finding contentment and even joy in her own life and identity. She recalls how as a very young child she nearly chokes on a hot dog in the back of her parents’ car, basking in the thrill of the occasion while imagining the screaming headline, “TOT CHOKES ON UNCOOKED SAUSAGE,” announcing her death (Syal, 1997, p. 37). Yet she does not resent Tracy in the least for what Meena once thought of a dramatic experience, nor the ironically similar headline “Tot Comes Back From the Dead” celebrating Tracy’s miraculous recovery (Syal, 1997, p. 321). She does not need to envy anyone else’s life anymore. By the end of the novel Meena has transformed herself into Anita and back again, gradually shedding the need to rely upon lies to improve her existence, till at last she is able to move on with her life—her own life and nobody else’s.

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