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INDIAN CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN MEERASYAL'S LIFE ISN'T ALL HA HAHEEHEE

M. Sri Vidhya @ Thangalakshmi^{*1}

^{*1}Research Scholar, Department of English, M.S. University, Tirunelveli,

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Abstract

This paper is about the Indian cultural elements in the novel Life Isn't All Ha HaHeeHee authored by MeeraSyal. The characters in the novel have dual identities but they are proud to expose their Indian identity by sticking on to the Indian culture in the host land. Having settled in different countries, it is their wish to adopt the foreign culture but instead they are consistent to follow the homeland culture; even though they belonged to second generation diasporans. The important thing to note in this novel is the characters are happy to glorify their homeland (India) culture, which is typically the Punjabi tradition and customs.

Keywords: Identity; Culture; Alienation; Diaspora; Dual Identities; Syal.

Abbreviation used: Life Isn't All Ha HaHeeHee – LAHH.

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1. Introduction

The word diaspora means the dispersion of people voluntarily or involuntarily. The word was first used to describe the scattering of Jews from Babylonia in the 5th century BC. The term originates from the Greek word 'diaspeiro', which means 'dispersion or scattering'. Paranjape says that the Indian Diaspora is one of the largest diasporas in the world. Shukla states in her book *India Abroad* that, the Indian diaspora is a vibrant one.

Ross Poole in his book *Nation and Identity* defines culture and connects it with the construction of identity consciousness as follows:

Culture on the other hand, was rooted in specific ways of life, particular traditions and histories. It allowed for dimensions of feeling, poetry, mythology and oral tradition It was also essentially plural: the culture of one nation was its own, and not a better or

worse variant of another. The development of this concept was a crucial component in the emergence of nationalist consciousness. It permitted each nation to claim for itself a value which was in principle not available to others. (118)

Anthony D. Smith, Montserrat Guibernau, Otto Bauer and Steven Grosby are also of the same opinion. Smith in his book *Nationalism* (2001) states nation as a human community with common myths, history and also with a common culture. Guibernau in his book, *Understanding Nationalism*, refers to 'nation' as a community of people who shares a common culture. Bauer views nation as "defined by the community and its culture" (41). Grosby observes in his book *Nationalism* says that "culture provides an individual with the sense that he/she belongs to one nation" (20).

Max Weber in his book *Sociology of Culture* comments on culture as follows:

It is a customary view in the sociology of culture that culture has the following basic functions to perform: (i) the function of gathering, preserving and transmitting of values, knowledge, and experience (i.e., informative), (ii) the significative, or symbolic function (i.e., the expression and entrenchment of meanings, knowledge, and values within a system of symbols), (iii) the communicative function (ensuring communication between people during the process of various activities and the promotion of unity and interrelations between the members of a given society). (53)

In short, culture suggests the way of living. Culture provides the identity for an individual. Culture is a symbol of expression, which passes from one generation to other generation to identify one belonging to a nation.

Meera Syal is an Indian-British writer. Syal belongs to second generation Indian diaspora. She is a multi-talented personality like novelist, actress, comedian, journalist, singer, producer and she is one of the most famous Asian British citizens of UK. She belongs to Punjabi tradition. Her second novel *Life Isn't All Ha HaHeeHee* (1999) explicates the Punjabi culture and tradition.

Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha HaHeeHee* is about friendship and marriage, which are bound up with Indian cultural background and the novel is set in a British Asian community. Sunita, Chila and Tania are three close friends for more than 20 years in UK and the book starts with Chila's Punjabi wedding with Deepak. Tania is a documentary film maker. Though she is smart like British she is always seen as an Asian, and asked to produce reports on Indian arranged marriages by her Boss. Sunita is a brilliant law student, settled as a perfect housewife with Akash and two children. Sunita feels dissatisfied with her marriage life. But at the same time, she feels happy to be a perfect mother for two children. The title of the book is a quote from Tania's mother, and is symbolically indicate the story of the novel that life is mixed with both happiness and sorrows.

As Spivak says in her book *Nationalism and Imagination* that, "Culture is a rusing signifier" (31). According to her saying, cultural change is a major problem faced by the diasporic community especially by the second generation people. When they try to settle in a new country, they find several changes in the new society. It shocks them and due to the rigidity over the new exposure

they try to cling to their homeland culture by following it strictly. In the novel *Life Isn't All Ha HaHeeHee*, the opening scene describes a typical Indian Punjabi marriage between Chila and Deepak. In that marriage the different Punjabi cultural traditions are celebrated in an attempt to highlight Indianness in the diasporic space. The marriage function starts with a white horse which is used to carry the bridegroom usually in Punjabi weddings. The wedding procession starts with Deepak sitting on a white horse: "Trigger, the horse, was enjoying himself. Anything was better than the dumpy pubescent he was forced to heave around paddocks in Chigwell for the rest of the week. This was an easy gig, a gentle amble past kind hands and interesting odours" (LAHH 11). The white horse which carried Deepak during the wedding procession is described as a white snow falling from the sky: "The horse turned the corner into his road; white enough ... fell from the sky" (LAHH 10).

During the marriage occasion, Deepak was dressed up with Punjabi dhoti and turban. He is described in the novel as follows: "a man in the middle of the tinsel, pearls hanging down over his brown skin, suspended from a cartoon-size turban. He had a nervous small boy, similarly attired, on his lap" (LAHH 10). Deepak's parents are happy that he has chosen a Punjabi girl, which shows their need to protect their racial and cultural purity through maintaining the boundaries between what is British and what is Indian. According to their sort of thinking, Chila is the right bride who suits Deepak and who is also with the background of Indian culture and tradition.

Chilabought her wedding saree from 'Delhi Silk House'; she is described in the novel as a beautiful woman with lenghacholi, which again evinces the Indian culture:

... could not look up even if she wanted, weighed down by an embroidered dupatta encrusted with fake pearls and gold-plated balls. The heavy lengha prevented her from taking more than baby steps behind her almost-husband to whom she was tied, literally, her scarf to his turban (LAHH 13).

Further, the bride and the bridegroom made round the holy fire. This wedding reveals the fact that the diasporic people desires to follow their culture sternly. They really want to follow the Indian culture physically and psychologically and desire to expose their Indian identity in the diasporic space. Tania, who seems to be very modern in the novel often checks the auspicious Indian time for wedding is another example of following the Indian culture. In India according to the horoscopic tradition 'the auspicious time' decides everything. The good and the evil happenings take place in one's life because of the time; so it is an Indian tradition to check for the good time in each and every occasion.

The people of diaspora follow their family traditional system even though they live in other country. The traditional Indian family set up is that husband should go to work and wife should do household duties. In the novel, Sunita symbolizes the traditional Indian woman with regard to marriage and children. She stops working after her marriage though she is a former law student and social activist. She married her university lover Akash and enters into the domestic life and becomes a mother of two children. She is described as a good Hindu girl who is happy for marrying a Brahmin in order to preserve her traditional Indian culture: "I married a Brahmin, unlike you, polluting your genes with a gora. Sunita giggled. And what will your poor children

be, hah? Crazy mixed up mongrels who won't know how to eat with their fingers" (LAHH 51). She spends all her time like a traditional Indian housewife to decorate her house, "... organizing her cupboards and drawers, cooking, and happily catching up on the chat shows" (LAHH 34). She wakes up to make her husband "some tea and toast in the morning and to watch the sleep flake away from his eyes" (LAHH 35).

Chilaturms into a dutiful and traditional stay-at-home wife after her marriage like Sunita. Even when she later sees her husband kissing another woman, she stays loyal and convinces herself that "alcohol makes people do silly things" (LAHH 190).

Sunita always compares herself with the Indian mythical character 'Sita' from *Ramayana*. She lives with the typical Indian mind set of considering 'Sita' as a 'woman of purity and obedient life partner'. Sunita does not like other religion and also other culture. She wants to follow and preserve her own religion and culture. Because her parents insisted her that she should marry a Punjabi. They have given her freedom to get education and to choose her bridegroom as her wish. But he should be a Hindu Brahmin and at the same time a Punjabi.

Her mum and dad always insisted she should get her education and then think about marriage, if she wanted. They offered to do same introductions, and even said if she found someone herself, they wouldn't mind.... The subtext was, choose anyone you like, preferably a Hindu Punjabi with prospects (LAHH 53).

For instance, Sunita use to say Gayatri mantra into her daughter Nikita's ear for every night to keep her safe in the dark. In her marriage life, Sunita seems unhappy. But she wants to keep her family because it is one of the Indian traditions. She learned that in her culture, girls and women were inferior and men are the superiors: "Men would enter the house and sit, playing cards, waiting to be served while the women ran in clucking circles around them" (LAHH 80). Yet, she pursues her education with full intentions to have a career. However, Sunita falls in love with her eventual husband and focuses her attention towards the traditional family life and household peace.

Tania, Syal's the third protagonist, is completely different from her friends, Chila and Sunita. She rejects marriage and resists the Indian cultural values and traditions that slow her journey of development and growth in the diasporic space. Being a film maker, Tania feels that she has more opportunities to cross the boundaries and enjoy better cultural experiences that release her from communal pressures. Positioned within cosmopolitan circles, Tania feels that she is different from her Asian friends. In fact, Sunita and Chila "had feared they might lose her, when Tania broke loose from her traditional moorings and drifted into an uncharted ocean with her English man" (LAHH 18). But her friends know that her escape from her origin is not complete. When she visits them, she quickly resumes her cultural habits and behavior: "Tania still sat lie one with them, crossed legs, shoes off, unknotting herself in a way that suggested, despite her protestations, that part of her still responded to them like Home" (LAHH 19). This shows that Tania's identity is unavoidably associated with her Indian background and whatever happens she will never be able to "cauterize away" "this rogue gene," as she says (LAHH 148). In fact, she agrees to commit marriage when her parents have arranged few schedules. Later Tania rejects marriage because she finds herself refused by men from her own cultural background as "too

modern”, “too independent”, and “too western”. In her carrier, Tania struggles to prove herself that she is a good director beyond racism. Though she does not have any boundary in her family level, she has it in society because of racism. She has a little inferiority complex about her colour but she consoles herself in this way: “I’m a director first, an Asian second’, ‘I care about my audience’s IQ, not their race’, ‘Your talent is your calling card” (LAHH 250).Tania condemns the Indian people who do not follow punctuality.

Sunita exclaims that the Western culture is hated for its loosened structure regarding the traditional family set up. Sunita, recalls her mother criticising divorce as a deadly English disease: “Divorce was one of the English diseases my mum was afraid we would catch if we hung around Willis’ Fish Bar too much, along with short skirts, bad skin and bland food” (LAHH 79).

The diasporic people look for security. They want to mingle with their own community people because it gives them comfort. So the diasporic community urges to keep their tradition and culture to prove their identity. The cultural set up of Indian people does not change though they live in other country. The diaspora people may try to adjust with the new culture and society but at the same time they are not willing or feel happy to follow the host culture completely. At times, even when they live generation after generation in the settled land for a long time, they still consider it as another country. When discrimination occurs the first generation accepts it in an ordinary way, but the second and further generations are affected psychologically. The reason is that the second generation people consider the foreign country as their home country and follow its culture and tradition as their own. Therefore, if they face racial discrimination, it hurts them and raises questions regarding their roots. This kind of discrimination makes them to be alienated from the settled society and to think about it in many ways. But this novel explicates the culture and tradition of second generation diaspora community which helps them to prove their Indian identity.

The Asian culture is familiar among the native people. So Tania’s Boss asks her to do a film about Asian culture. She does the film with the portrayal of original life of her two friends: Sunita and Chila. Instead of doing a film with actor and actress, she portrays the original life of her friends. At last, the film achieves a great success.

Even though the three protagonists: Sunita, Chila and Tania are second generation diasporans they are genuine in accepting their Indian origin. They are born and brought up in London where they have seen only the British culture but the guidance of their parents made them to expose their real Indian identity. Thus the novelist Syal presents the Indian cultural elements through the characters.

On the whole, it is evident though Syal is a second generation diasporic writer she is happy to expose her Indian identity especially in three main instances as follows:

- 1) The novel opens with a Indian Punjabi wedding of Chila and Deepak
- 2) Sunita exclaims that ‘divorce is a deadly English disease and happy to follow Indian traditional culture of chanting ‘Gayathri mantras’ and also teaching the same to her children. She always compares herself with the Indian mythical character ‘Sita’.

- 3) Finally, Tania's acceptance towards her Indian identity and considering the same as 'elite' in all the ways.

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