



Culture Clash in Meera Syal's My Sister-Wife: a Feminist Thematic Study

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الصراع الثقافي في مسرحية "ضرتي": دراسة مواضيعية نسوية

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الملخص:

الصراع الثقافي في مسرحية " ضرتي " للكاتبة الاسيوية-الانكليزية ميلا سيال هو الموضوع الذي تحاول هذه الورقة أن توضحه. تفترض الورقة أن Syal تحاول تقديم عرض نسوي لموضوع الصدام الثقافي السائد في حياة المهاجرين إلى أوروبا. يهدف البحث إلى التحقق من صحة الفرضية باتباع منهج تحليل الشخصية. يبدأ البحث بمقدمة للموضوع والكاتب. يقدم البحث مناقشة للنص يلي ذلك الاستنتاج الذي يلخص نتائج التحليل. الكلمات المفتاحية: ميلا سيال ، "ضرتي" ، الحركة النسائية ، الأدب الآسيوي-الانكليزي ، الهجرة.

Abstract

Culture Clash in Meera Syal's *My Sister-Wife* is the theme that this paper tries to illustrate. The paper hypothesizes that Syal attempts to present a feminist presentation of the theme of culture clash that is dominant in the life of the immigrants to Europe. It aims at validating the hypothesis by following the character-analysis approach. It starts with an introduction to the subject and the writer. A discussion occurs followed by the conclusion that sums up the findings of the analysis.

Keywords: Meera Syal, *My Sister-Wife*, Feminism, Asian-British Literature, Immigration

Introduction

Meera Syal (1963-) is an English actress, and writer. She writes many screenplays and two novels, and she wins many awards such as EMMA (BT Ethnic and Multicultural Media Award) for Media Personality of the Year in 2001. She descends from an Indian family. She is born near Wolverhampton in the West Midlands. She got her B. A. in English drama at Manchester University. In 1996 Syal writes *Anita and Me* which is a semi-autobiographical novel that reflects her experience as an outsider child with brown skin who gradually starts to recognize that she is the 'other'. Because of the rise of racism in her home town, Syal's family moves to another place. The novel is nominated for the Guardian Fiction Prize and wins a Betty Trask Award. The work is written in a comic style. Procter states that "*Anita and Me* is an extremely funny, irreverent first novel which manages to evoke the pleasures and frustrations of childhood without becoming sentimental or nostalgic" (Procter).

In her novel *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999), Syal recounts the adventurous life of three Asian women growing up in English society. Procter adds that "Her work in fiction and on-screen is exemplary for the way in which it uses humor to both challenge the limits of political correctness and to contribute to a politicized understanding of British Asian culture." (Procter).

Syal's screenplay *My Sister Wife* is no exception. It explores the dilemma of the characters who are living in a western society and cling to the norms and traditions of their origin. The play dwells on the idea that trying to incorporate traditions of both cultures is disastrous. The writer catches the attention of the BBC after the performance of her play *One of Us*. The BCC orders her to write a script for the television about Pakistani

Muslim women. She cherishes the opportunity and writes *My Sister Wife* (Chanda). Syal cooperates with Asmaa Pirzada who makes a research on four sister-wives in London (Ranasinha 254).

Methodology

Syal's screen play *My Sister Wife* is the core of this paper. To illustrate the main points that the writer tries to highlight, the researcher chooses the character-analysis approach to discuss the theme of the suffering of the immigrants in a new culture. This approach is a suitable one to show the characters' shattering between their traditions and their modernized life in the new homeland.

Discussion

The play is about Farah a beautiful, ambitious, successful working Muslim woman of Pakistani origin. She falls in love with Asif Shah not knowing that he is a married man with two daughters. After discovering the truth she is shocked and decided to leave him not only because he is married but "He's a liar, mummy. He lies at me No-one lies at me" (Scene 5). Yet she was infatuated with Asif that her parents especially the mother Mumtaz could persuade her to marry him. The mother's leverage is that he has married his first wife not for love while he loves Farah. Besides, his marriage to his first wife is not registered in Britain. The mother believes that the marriage is an opportunity for her daughter, because Asif is rich young man, and both of them belong to the same race and religion. The mother makes every effort to persuade her daughter to marry any Pakistani man even if he is not a suitable match: "Could not get me to marry the village idiots in flares your friends kept suggesting. Asif is rich and brown so he'll do ... I'll look fab in harem and if maharaji gets bored, he can always swap me for a bloody

camel" said Farah (Scene 5). But the mother persuades her daughter in the name of "Honour, Obligation, Duty to the family" (Scene, 5). The mother adds that if Asif divorces his first wife, that would disgrace him in the eyes of Farah's family.

Farah's mother tells her that she can live happily with the man she loves and can adjust herself as her mother did: "love is simple", said Mumtaz who has lived with the big family of Tariq, her husband whom she has met at the wedding night. The writer shows the readers how foolishly the parents neglect the gap between the two generations assuming that what suits their generation would suit their daughter. The parents also disregard the cultural gap between Pakistani culture and the Western British culture. Farah herself has internalized her family traditional value. According to Farah, to be a decent woman is to be a married woman, "Finding respectability at twenty-nine and two thirds...." (Scene 10), said Farah to herself at her wedding day.

In her book, *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain: Culture in Translation*, Ruvani Ranasinha devotes a chapter for analyzing the efforts of Syal and Hanif Kureishi as they are 'cultural mediators' through their literary works. Ranasinha states:

Kureishi's and Syal's work charts the uneasy relationship between postcolonialism and multiculturalism, addressing in particular the legacy of colonialism, and its efforts on immigrants and their descendants in contemporary Britain. What is distinctive about their generation is that they act as cultural translators, in their mediations between majority and minority communities rather than between countries. The politics of first-generation migrant writers' reconstitution of the

foreign country for the target Western audience contrasts with the later minority genre that juxtaposes, challenges and reinforce dominant notions of their communities (Ranashiha, 221).

Farah is born, educated and maintained a successful career in England and supposedly falls in love with the man she loves that is Asif Khan. Yet, she finds herself marrying an already married man with two daughters and lives with his mother and wife in one big house. Asif persuades Farah that she is his only love, yet she notices that he returns to love his first wife Maryam. Maryam is portrayed as a woman who lives in the shadow. Nobody outside the family knows that she is Asif's wife. She is not registered. She cooks and makes shopping every day. She is passive obedient and maintains the household business very well. Farah and Maryam find themselves in a competition to please Asif. Ironically each one of them believes that Asif likes the model of the other. Maryam starts to modernize herself. She starts to wear western clothes; she cuts her long black hair; drive a car and start to work in the company of Farah. Moreover, she starts to treat her husband disrespectfully when she dares to rebuke him saying "shut up". On the other hand, Farah starts to wear the traditional Indian dresses and hair-cut. Meenakshi Ponnuswami in her essay "Citizenship and Gender in Asian-British Performance" concludes that "the complexity and insight of *My Sister-Wife* lie in Syal's sympathetic if cautionary portrayal of Farah's longing for an ethnic home to be nostalgic about; Syal suggests that the inability to relinquish a sentimental tie to an imagined history endangers rather than empowers women" (48).

Syal is mainly concerned with the difference between the first-generation of immigrants and the values and beliefs of their offspring. Rather than focusing on conflicts between cultures, she portrays the discord between

generations within the same community. This focus on the differences between two generations within one community forms the basis of her appeal to new generations of readers, for whom these differences may be part of their own experience (Ranasinha 225). In *My Sister Wife*, the first generation of immigrants is represented by the parents who stick firmly to their beliefs and traditions. Asif's mother Sabia insists on preparing remedies at home that are supposed to be tonics. She gives her drugs to the children and the parents accept that wholeheartedly. Farah pleads to Asif to live with her in another house and tells him that his mother has given her a medicine that kills her plant instantly, but Asif does not react. Asif could not break the family traditions. He does not agree to live in another house with his second wife. The dramatic irony is that the play is placed in a very civilized and modernized culture in which one can have access to good medicines. Syal says that she visits India at the age of twenty-two and finds out that the first generation of the immigrants cling to traditions which are outdated in its homeland. Asif's mother symbolizes that generation which clings to traditions that have already been neglected in its home (Ranasinha 225).

Sabia, convinces the two wives that the best way to gain Asif's favour is to give him a baby boy. She takes Farah to a witch named Mata-ji to make her potion that guarantees that she will give birth to a baby boy. Farah finds out that there are women who are asking for the help of the same witch. Thus the first generation of immigrants has created its own culture within the British culture.

Farah's mental condition starts to degenerate as she lost her first baby obviously because of the tonics of Sabia. She believes that the witch Mata-ji has real powers. She does not listen to Poppy, her English friend:

"Farah: how can we resolve anything when there's always another person to run to when things go wrong. She's got some potion from that Mata-ji witch Southall. She put a spell on him..."

Poppy: listen to yourself. You're an intelligent women, you have got a career....you have to get out of there!...

Farah: because if I can get him into my own space, I can fight her if I could have a baby, I know I could get him back

.....
Poppy : I 'm a woman . No woman I know could live like this."
(Scene 65)

Farah becomes haunted by the idea that she should regain Asif and believes that having a baby boy is the only mean to win her husband's favour. She discovers that Asif has obliged Maryam to make abortion before because the fetus was a female. Then she starts to talk to the ghosts of the four sister-wives who appears only to her. Discovering that Maryam is pregnant again she decides to poison her by the medicine she has bought from the witch. It is Asif who is poised and dead symbolizing the death of the patriarchy that stifles itself by its means. "Sabia: (Urdu) My sonmy life. (English) I am alone. Heart attack! I know the truth" (Scene 118).

"Maryam and Farah compete for Asif's love by trying to produce a male heir, underling the degree to which they are enmeshed in patriarchy. The text offers no solutions but tends towards a nuanced critique of polygamy. Syal suggests that the script took a polygamous set up in a wealthy family as a metaphor for the painful adaptation processes facing women of my generation" (PC 127) (Ranasinha 257).

Ranasinha adds that Syal subtly has given Indian culture a voice to defend itself. One of the four ghosts justifies Farah's sense of agony, because of the cultural differences. And that sharing a husband needs strength: "You think to share is a weak thing? ...I understand. You have grown up in a selfish country. Me. Mine. This is all girls like you" (Sister-Wife 140).

When Asif's friends criticized him for having married to two women at the same time he said that he treats them equally and respectfully and do not treat one of them as a mistress he should shun publicly, "(Asif turns to first man) What take Glenda, the discipline Queen, Home to meet Sufia?...I am honest with my wife. Suppose that's my burden, coming from a primitive culture" (*Sister-wife* 199). While Asif reveals the hypocrisy of the men in the British society, his speech also reveals the weight of the cultural traditions he insists to internalize and for which he eventually become a victim.

Conclusion

To sum up, the play displays the dilemma of the characters who belong to one community and ethnicity when they insist to implement their traditions in a different culture. It is not only the problem of women that the play tries to expose. Asif is also a victim. He could have easily lived with Farah in a separated house. He could have divorced Maryam and keeps on paying for the living of her and the children, but it is his mother who pushes him to follow her will. The mother, Sabia, internalizes the gender role of the patriarchy after the death of the father. Women, especially the first generation of immigrants in the play, are the victims and victimizers. Sabia's son is dead at the end. The play represents a feminist reading for the suffering of the immigrants who have suffered a lot from being neither living at their homeland nor leaving it. The play is a plea for being open-minded characters who can adapt to the new life and with the conditions that outcome from one's decisions. Being a good woman does not mean to follow the patriarchal model of thinking and living. The play sends the idea that a woman can be herself and choose a better life and future if she increases her self-esteem and does not pursue the desires of the man in her life. The blind obedience for the worn-out social traditions may lead to catastrophic outcomes.

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