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Facing Ground Reality: Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee

Abstract: Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee (1999) proves to be a fruitful endeavour from the mighty pen of a renowned British-Indian writer, Meera Syal. Apart from recounting the life-stories and different diasporic experiences of three British-Asian friends – Chila, Sunita and Tania; the novel also throws light on the beauty of human relationships. The three friends are in their mid-thirties and seem to have enjoyed their lives. But the thorough reading of the novel reveals how they all feel empty from within and the only reason is the lack of warmth in relationships. It might be with their partners, family members etc. The diasporic character of the novel is also reflected through its characters' yearning to go back to their origins. Tania's desire to go 'home' and hide herself in her mother's lap; Chila's desire to bring up Anand in India by feeding him with Indian cultural values are clear instances of the diasporic side of the novel.

Keywords: Human relationships, Cultural hybridity, Dual Identity.

The title of the novel, Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee (1999), in itself, is an amusing one and clearly reflects upon life as being a severe combination of both—ha ha hee hee as well as not ha ha hee hee. Meera Syal's choice of this bilingual title strictly confirms her interest in

bilingualism and biculturalism. And her this interest is often brought out through the portrayal of Asian characters living in Britain. Evidently, in 2013, at SOAS, University of London, she was honoured as the leading figure in a modern British cultural life just because of her life-like British-Asian characters. In the present novel too, she has talked about three British-Asian friends—Chila, Sunita, and Tania. They are in their mid-thirties and appear to have almost settled into their marital lives; Tania, being an exception, is living with her English boyfriend named Martin, not yet married. Sunita has half-experienced her marriage life with a therapist, Akash and has two sweet children—Nikita and Sunil whereas Chila has recently wedded a business tycoon, Deepak.

On the surface level, the novel seems to be an interesting tale of friendship but its close scrutiny explains that it also contains within it the universal themes of love, marriage, motherhood, and betrayal etc. The first few chapters of the novel deal with the almost happy note i.e., the harmony among three friends—their girly chats even in their thirties, their luncheons, dinner and dance parties at Soho; their frequent visits to each other's house; Sunita's and Chila's seeming successful marital lives; and Tania's blooming career as a film maker etc. But in the middle of the novel, it seems that after Tania's film is being shown on in The Buzz Bar, every relationship turns upside down. The three friends, who themselves were a complete whole in the beginning, appear as three isolated individuals in the end. Ming reviews, "This is a complex, deep and thoughtful book that portrayed three childhood friends as they grew up I marvel at the psychological depth and the tension conveyed in their relationships" (Web).

The opening of the novel takes us to Chila's wedding where we meet Tania and Sunita too. Chila is the last of three to get a man and is considered the luckiest one to bag "the most eligible bachelor within a twenty-mile radius" (Syal 14) i.e, Deepak. No one had ever thought of this dark dumbo's marriage to such a business tycoon, not even her friends. "Her watching friends' hearts contracted in unison; they had never assumed Chila would get married, that any

man would understand or recognize her hidden, fragile charms. And now they saw her beauty in full bloom, they worried for her and about him.” (Syal 22) Even her aunties used to say, “ ‘No man will ever want that one, the plump darkie with the shy stammer’ ” (Syal 14). Pandit Kumar, the priest, also feels jealous at the time of her wedding as he himself wanted Deepak to marry his own daughter. Finally, Chila is Deepak’s wife to each and everyone’s surprise. Since her childhood, Chila had often been tagged with many unpleasant names such as ‘poor Chila’, ‘dark dumbo’, ‘plump darkie’, ‘soft-in-the head Chila’, ‘a cut and paste girl’, and ‘slow Chila’ etc. Not only this, most of the people also used to pair her off with a boy with a withered arm or with a club foot but nobody knew what would happen next. Apparently, she is seen enjoying her life at its best with her favourite Deepak. “It’s so nice, just making him some tea and toast in the morning and watching the sleep flake away from his eyes. Me in my kitchen with my man.” (Syal 37) Chila’s mother had once advised her not to expect too much from anyone and following this advice, she has successfully built a healthy relationship between them. “I’ve never been disappointed because everything good about Deeps is a big fat bonus. Every little lovely thing he does is a wonderful surprise. And I know that at some point in the future he’s going to severely piss me off, but I’m ready for it.” (Syal 38) Chila, unlike Sunita and Tania, has the distinctive quality of accepting life as it comes to her. She adores Deepak, worships him despite knowing his earlier affairs. Incredibly, Deepak has also been Tania’s ex-boyfriend and it is this affair that, later on, destroys Chila’s happy marriage life.

Meera Syal has very intelligently chosen to speak about human relationships in this novel—how people love, who they love, and how these relationships flourish through ups and downs of life. Tania, a film maker and director like the writer herself, has also been assigned a task by her boss, Jonathan to make a documentary on human relationships. “ ‘No more restaurant gigs, And no more chinging cash registers. We want the human angle now. How people love, who they love, that tells you more than a skipload of earnest stastics ... Hi, David!

Got over Edinburgh yet?’ ” (Syal 64) Tania’s boss is impressed by Chila to such an extent that he also suggests to Tania to do something on her. “ ‘She’s a remarkable woman, your friend. Do you know how rare it is, how much people want to see and have what she has?’ ” (Syal 64-65) Tania is also surprised at how this dark dumbo has managed to talk with a group of people Tania doesn’t even know. Chila seems so deep in conversation with them that Tania could see only the faces of the people around her, listening with great amusement as Chila’s hands make some graceful arcs. This way, Chila seems to have achieved a glorious victory in understanding human relationships. She, herself, is amazed at how interested everyone has been in her, curious enough to know about her family and her lovely husband. True, Deepak and Chila love each other. No doubt, there has been a series of beautiful women in Deepak’s life but Chila’s love and affection for him has never been less. “Marriage was a rebirth for him, a cleansing away of his sorry past, all his karmic junk thrown into the holy fire, taken away by a priest who thought he was Elvis.” (Syal 67) They have nicely settled into their routine life—she, as a dutiful wife, sends Deepak to work and waits for him to come back from work; decorates the house; organizes all the cupboards and drawers; lines them up with scented paper; makes delicious dishes for him etc. Everything in the house has its proper place now and Deepak has also begun to notice how much the place has changed after Chila’s arrival.

Did she actually spend time folding those napkins into swans? Something about having the perfect wife, the perfect life, flowing water and no idea of what it all meant. He had been baffled by too many choices, that’s why he was here. The initial amazement he felt at being able to attract so many women soon grew into a kind of contempt. It was all too busy. (Syal 132)

Deepak’s chest widens with pride when his business associates and their wives enjoy the company of Chila. Chila tells them that she is being filmed for a television programme and this arouses their interest in her much more. The result is that one, later on, finds Leila, Manju,

and Chandni at Tania's film premiere to watch their new friend on the screen. Moreover, they also start going out together for luncheons and dinner parties etc. As a couple, Deepak and Chila become everyone's ideal they meet. For a moment, Deepak gets irritated at the mention of Tania and her film by Chila before his friends and this causes a temporary rift between them. But Deepak's love towards his lovely wife immediately starts bubbling when he sees a single tear spilling down her cheek.

‘Oh, shit ... oh, God, I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have, shouted ... Come here.’ God, he hated Tania. Hated the way she managed to throw her shadow from so far away. He had promised to protect this woman pressed against him, shuddering. He had promised himself he would keep his promises, from now on. He felt as if his survival depended on it. His salvation stood weeping in his arms. (Syal 119)

No one would have ever thought how soon Deepak's attraction shifts from Chila to Tania. Chila's small world, she had woven with love and devotion, finally shatters when she sees her dear Deepak busy kissing Tania at the end of film premiere. All those promises and vows Deepak had made to Chila now mean nothing to her. “She gulps and hiccups and streams sticky liquid and lava grief, and the harder she cries, the harder they kiss. She wants to hold both of them, she wants to stand between them, and her bookend loves.” (Syal 183) Later on, it is discovered that Chila is pregnant and is going to give birth to Deepak's baby very soon. In this hour of difficulty, it is only Sunita who stands by Chila at every moment. It is she who takes her to doctor for regular check up though fortnightly, weekly, or daily. Even at the time of her delivery, Deepak is not by her side and this widens the gulf between them much more. No doubt, after the confirmation of Chila's pregnancy, Deepak tries to provide her all the comforts but nothing pleases her now.

It was the first of many grandiose gestures that had marked the last few months: first the cleaner, then a course of driving lessons and a spanking new Toyota when Chila passed her test first time. Next an extension into the vast garden, encompassing a sun lounge and a huge fishtank that covered an entire wall; and finally the gold credit card, a joint one naturally, which he encouraged Chila to use at every opportunity, although she had used it with caution, knowing he would have proof of every purchase when the statement came in. (Syal 190-91)

Deepak wants a healthy baby from Chila, no matter what had happened that night and would happen many more times. He hires a cleaner, Mrs Singh for her insisting no child of his would be threatened by her obsessional devotion to household work. He has been horrified to find out that Chila is medically described as an elderly primigravida and this makes him shower her with unprompted favours. But how could she forget that devious night? Since then, she had no contact with Tania, nor had Tania rung her. Chila had tried many times to dial her number but every time, something had pushed her back. “She would shake, she would see a silhouette in neon on a windy terrace and she would rush to the bathroom to be sick.” (Syal 192) First, Tania’s film annoys her two dearest friends i.e., Chila and Sunita and then, her affair with Deepak does so. It is evident in the novel how curious Chila is to become a film star and how many times she begs her friend to make her a star.

‘See, I’ve told everyone about it, all Deepak’s friends, and they were dead impressed, and I promised to invite them all to the – what do you call it? – showing, premium, whatever, and they’ve started inviting me to coffee mornings now and tomorrow I’m going to this Tupperware for India Street Kids thing and ... I really want to do it, Tans. I’ll be really good on it, promise.’ (Syal 140)

Tania's boss has already wanted her to work on her friend, Chila and Chila's interest in it convinces her to think about it. She decides to make a documentary on human relationships presenting Chila and Deepak, Sunita and Akash, Raj and Seema etc. on the screen. Her boss calls these relationships—"The new religion of the millennium" (Syal 65). Ironically, Tania gives, each and everyone present in The Buzz Bar at her film premiere, a message of happy relationships, but she herself is a big failure in maintaining these relationships. When her brother, Prem informs her about her dying father, lying helplessly in the hospital, she realizes, "As a daughter, she had failed. Oh, she may be top dog, big boots in that far off TV land, but here, where it mattered, she was nobody" (Syal 299). That night, in The Buzz Bar, Tania was everything—a celebrity, clad in ruby-red sari, with her head high with fame. She was the belle of the evening. Everyone looked wide-eyed at her as a great business success without knowing how much empty she was from inside. After the film was over, she stood firm collecting embraces and several exchanged cards from film and TV people and thanking them all. She felt satisfied at what she had shown on the screen, though it had annoyed her dearest friends. "Tania's ruby-red sari shimmered like some rippling beacon under the lights. Her hand ached from the hundreds of palms she'd pressed, her jaw from the millions of thank you for comings, her cheeks tingled from a billion fleeting you're so clever kisses." (Syal 169) Through the portrayal of Tania, Meera Syal has given us a chance to have a deep peep into a director's or film-maker's life. At present, Tania is at the top but alone, devoid of all relationships. Throughout her life, she remains unsuccessful in developing healthy relationships with her parents. Most of the time in the novel, she is seen complaining about her boastful, good-for-nothing father. In her opinion, her father has high ambitions meant for nothing and she also blames her mother for supporting his fragile ego. "'You be the best. You will get the best.' Brave words from a man who never got off the factory floor long enough to see the sky, whose idea of haute couture was Crimplene trousers with the crease already sewn in, who's every

effort to better himself just succeeded in making us ashamed of who we were.” (Syal 144) She also feels disgusted at her father’s blustering attempts to hide their lowly status before jolly Sikh uncle. But in the end, when she finds her father on death bed, she tries to do everything for him what she should have done before as a loving daughter. Her father lies in unconscious limbo and knows nothing; she, sitting by his side, tries to make him laugh by jingling her bangles near his ear. She also waves packets of spices under his nose and crushes some leaves of fresh coriander beneath his nostrils so that he could wrinkle his nose with the recognition of spices. And he does so recognizing the ground cinnamon, the garam masala, and the chana masala mixture etc. Tania is happy to find another positive sign that his hair is still growing. It means that his body continues to thrive despite his silence. Tania’s brother, Prem takes it wrong thinking she is only serving her father at this last moment because of his will. ““I can’t believe ... I know you’ve sunk pretty low but ... Do you think anything you do will make any difference now? He can’t change his will, he’s not capable and I will personally drag you through the courts if you dare—’ ” (Syal 317) ironically, father is about to die and the son is talking about his will. Someone has rightly said, “A son can bear with equanimity the loss of his father, but the loss of his inheritance may drive him to despair” (Mehra 96). Prem has never liked Tania’s ways, her gadding about with her arty-farty friends and has always wanted her to come back to their own small world. It is only now Tania realizes what the relationships are. She now yearns for goodness and resolution, but it is too late. Not only have her family, even Sunita and Chila been away from her because of her ways. The woman, who used to be dizzy with her own beauty and drunk with freedom, is now nobody in the eyes of her family, friends, and relatives. She wants to go somewhere she would call ‘home’ and to bury herself in her mother’s lap.

She wanted to bury herself in the billowing waves of one of her mother’s voluminous housecoats, her favourite pre-school game, to make a tent and invite

everyone to lounge in the shade of Mama's gargantuan lights, Chila, Sunita, Deepak even Saki, gather them all in and create sanctuary. There had to be somewhere she could call home. (Syal 272-73)

Tania's yearning for 'home' and to go back to her childhood days forms one of the major concepts of diasporic studies. Many diasporic writers i.e., Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Homi Bhaba, Stuart Hall etc. have written too much about 'home' according to their own diasporic experiences. Salman Rushdie in his essay, "Imaginary Homelands" says that 'home' exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present. John McLeod quotes Avtar Brah in his essay, "Diaspora Identities" who says that, "'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (McLeod 209).

Meera Syal has also tried to explain the concept of 'home' but in some another way. Tania's 'home' is not a home of origin or homeland but a place where she had left behind the relationships—her parents, her family, their love and warmth. And this place can also be the hostland i.e., London. After having broken off with Sunita and Chila, Tania tries to seek refuge in her childhood home for a while. Seeing the other women in neighbourhood, the painful memory of her mother comes back to her. She inhales deeply remembering how her mother also used to donate leftovers to the city sparrows; how she herself used to dread arriving home from school with her friends, and finding her huge mama parked like a juggernaut in their front garden. She feels nostalgic about all those moments and wants to embrace them. She wants to re-live the life of past but nothing can be done. Meera Syal has, undoubtedly, followed the convention of diasporic writers by defining the concept of 'home' but her skill lies in redefining it by relating it not only to the homeland but to the hostland too. The concept is further glorified by Chila's desire to take her son, Anand to India and bring him up there. She decides that she would play him all kinds of music to sweeten his soul i.e., the Old Seventies soul stuff including

Lata, teach him to be kind to animals, and feed him simple food straight from the earth. She would also massage his body with rich almond oil to make his limbs strong, never smack him, kiss him every day, take him to temple and theatre etc. “She would rewrite the book on motherhood, because every new mother could.” (Syal 304) There would be passionate open conversations between the mother and son with no silences. It is quite strange here that Chila has never been to India but still she calls herself ‘Indian’ and also wants her son to know about rich Indian culture. Once again, the difference between the two cultures is highlighted. Chila’s desire to take Anand to India is a clear evidence that the Indian values, especially in the context of maintaining human relationships, supercede the British values.

The deception Chila has to face from Deepak and Tania makes her believe the uncertainties of this seeming beautiful life. “She has constructed a whole life around it. No-one must leave. No-one leaves nice people. I am nice. I will make myself nice. Someone should have told her, her mother, her friends, all those romances she read, all those films she watched, all those customs she upheld, that there are no guarantees.” (Syal 183-84) She has always been true to Deepak, having accepted him with all his previous affairs. But his involvement with Tania creates a serious gap between them that can never be filled. She is astonished at how he is capable of handling his affair with his wife’s friend so brilliantly. “She had no history, brought no ghosts with her as they got into bed. Which meant everything he did was unique, ground breaking, perfect How could he have deemed her special when he’d seen it all before, done it all before?” (Syal 270) His affair with Tania hurts her to such an extent that she doesn’t even allow him to see their son, Anand. After his birth, Chila is convinced that she has got some other reason to live. She decides to live for her dear son and bring him up with rich Indian cultural values.

Chila’s refusal to allow Deepak see their son comes as a big shock to him. He also requests Tania to talk to Chila on his behalf but it is of no use. Even Sunita pays no attention

to his pleadings. It is only after Chila's eighth refusal to see him that he thinks of kidnapping his own son. He justifies his action of kidnapping thinking love makes people do terrible things. He finds himself in limbo—a rejected husband, a rejected father, a rejected friend and, more interestingly, a rejected lover of Tania. Like Tania, Deepak is also a big failure in dealing with human relationships. "He was not prepared for this, this monochrome limbo, a gradual draining away of vital colours which left him weak-bodied and with a mind that raced like fever." (Syal 306) There is a deep contrast between Chila's love for Deepak and Tania's love for him. Chila's magnanimity lies in the fact that even after having discovered her husband's liaison, she somehow tries to maintain the sanctity of their marital relationship by visiting doctor in his company before her delivery. "He was still with her. They were still married. They were soon to be parents. Within those certainties, she would still try her best.... Tonight she would cook, and clean her own kitchen afterwards. And plan something very special for dessert." (Syal 271) On the other hand, Tania's relationship with Deepak is of momentary nature. No doubt, she loves him but her father's sickness and her alienation from her dearest friends make her realize the futility of their relationship. The belle of that evening in The Buzz Bar, who declared her victory with her head high by making a documentary on human relationships, herself is a big failure in it. It seems that Meera Syal has intentionally chosen the subject of human relationships in order to satirize how these sacred relationships are being mocked at in this post-modern era. They have completely lost their sanctity. Tania feels so alone and dejected that she has to sob her secrets to pigeons as there is nobody to listen to her. "Deepak was just an excuse really, the bogymen who I could claim led me astray." (Syal 314) Tania and Deepak have both been business successes but big failures with regard to relationships. Benjamin Franklin says, "Success has ruined many a man" (Mehra 97) and this is true in case of both Tania and Deepak.

The opening chapters of the novel provide us with Tania living with an Englishman named Martin. They have been living together for a long time; Martin loves Tania but is not yet sure whether she loves him or not. This gag writer tries, in so many ways, to win over her love but all in vain. He, himself, does not know of the chemical that has kept them together. The uncertainty of their relationship is quite evident in these lines, “Was he chosen? Or was she up for it and he happened to be in the vicinity? Two years later, he still occasionally asked himself this same question, worrying it like a loose tooth; delicious uncertainty was what kept them going, kept it all fresh and exciting” (Syal 108). Martin, as a writer, is not as successful as Tania is in her film industry but he always takes pride in her success. That night, in The Buzz Bar, Martin is seen bursting with appreciation for her not knowing what would happen next between his Tania and Deepak. The passionate kiss between Tania and Deepak makes him disappear from the scene forever. After that, no mention of Martin is found anywhere in the novel. Apparently, Tania does make a documentary on human relationships but she herself lacks the understanding of these relationships.

Everything else I can pick up or discard when I choose; my culture is a movable feast ... Unlike Sunita, I don't just wave the placards and wear the badges. Unlike Chila, I don't sit back and trust to the fickle workings of fate. 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. (Syal 148)

True, she is left alone in the end to blame nobody except herself. The kind of life she chooses and the ways she adopts become the real cause of her alienation. It is also because of her ways that she has to face rejection at the hands of many boys who would come to see her for marriage. In their opinion, she is too modern or too western or would not fit in the joint family system. Sarcastically, she fits nowhere. She is recognized no more as “the voice of Brit-

Asian Yoof” (Syal 316) but as “Tendon-sahib’s lost daughter” (Syal 316). The name and fame, people had showered on her that night, has separated her from her dear ones. “I told my story to myself, to finally believe it, because no-one else would. Not then.” (Syal 313) It is also due to Tania’s realization that the three friends are seen together in the end, though for a short period. They are together when Deepak hurriedly takes his baby away from Chila’s lap and Tania helps Chila and Sunita in bringing him back by calling up the police. Finally, they are seen together at Tania’s father’s funeral.

As the entire focus is upon the human relationships in this chapter, it becomes almost necessary to talk about Sunita’s relationship with Akash apart from Chila’s with Deepak and Tania’s with Martin and Deepak as well. Akash is a psycho-therapist and thus has a deep knowledge about human mind—conscious, unconscious, and sub-conscious.

‘I mean, I thought when he gave up law, he’d go into this big depression because it was his childhood dream. You know, brown barrister in white wig overturning the fascist system. But therapy is such a growth industry, he says, and transcultural therapy, which he’s so perfect for because he’s bilingual, that’s where the money is.’ (Syal 47)

Sunita was halfway through her Law degree when she had met Akash. Funny enough, she failed her finals as most of her revision had taken place on Akash’s mattress. After that, she decided to marry Akash and now they have been living together with their children—Nikita and Sunil. Like every happy couple, they both share the simple pleasures of their marital life. Sunita has turned into a typical Indian housewife with so much cellulite.

Sunita’s delicate, doll-like features were now softened by the fleshy mantle worn by married Indian ladies in their mid-thirties. It was like a uniform, the designer silks, the ostentatious gold jewellery, collected on booty trips to

Bahrain, the rippling belly rolls escaping from painted on sari blouses. No guilty aerobic sessions for them. (Syal 19)

Despite Sunita's fading beauty, Akash loves her in the same way as he used to do in their university days and Sunita loves him too. Instead of meeting fire with fire or rising to Akash's angry bait, she always chooses to acquiesce and this is the main cause of their happy relationship. "Even now, after seven years, she could not remember one screaming match. Some long silence perhaps, some endless sulks, a few slamming doors. But they had not crossed that line, into the war zone where things were said and done which could not be undone. Not yet." (Syal 49) Sunita is not only a loving wife but a perfect housemaker and a devoted mother too. Before going out with her friends i.e., Tania and Chila, she gets everything ready as per the requirements of Akash and her children. For instance, she leaves their pyjamas washed and ironed on their beds, the food ready on the cooker, their favourite books out at the right pages for their bedtime story etc. It seems that her family is the pivot of her life. When Sunil gets some minor injury in her absence, she becomes so restless that she does not even spare Akash from her abuses. For Tania, it is "... the bad smell of motherhood that always spoiled their fun" (Syal 46). After Sunil's accident, Sunita would say no, most of the times, to Chila and Tania who would ring her up for movies and occasional meals. Anyhow, she is contented with her conjugal life. Akash comes home at the same time, helps wash and feed the children and disappears into his study the minute they are in bed and sits at his computer. They don't go out much like other couples, yet seem the happy ones.

Akash is seen engrossed with his studies most of the time; as a result, she also develops a habit of reading. It is only through re-reading her readings that Akash can have a peep into Sunita's dissected soul and into what she thinks about him. Akash's preoccupation with his computer and books, somehow, becomes the cause of gap between them and with the passage of time, the gap widens to such an extent that Sunita tries to comfort herself in Dr Krishan

Bedi's arms. She comes in contact with Dr Bedi, who is just 25, during her visit to hospital for Chila's daily check ups. While Chila goes into a room to give blood and urine samples, Sunita would sit chatting with Krishan. Slowly and gradually, they become so intimate with each other that Sunita confesses all her hidden griefs to him. She hugs him tight sobbing how she lost her career and once lost her baby of eight weeks. At this, his hands rise slowly and cup her cheeks tenderly.

This was it, she knew. All these weeks Sunita had wondered about this moment and of course it happened when she had no make-up on, reeked of sweat and had a considerable amount of nasal fluid smeared over her face One kiss leads to another. Now she knew, if it had not been for Tania and Deepak, she would not be here, now, like this. And it came to her with the velocity of epiphany, the illumination of angels, the simplicity of snow. (Syal 303)

Sunita seems to be justifying Tania's relationship with Deepak here as she herself has also become a part of some sort of affair with Krishan, though for a short period. Whenever, she has to go to hospital with Chila, she would miss nothing—certainly not the new clothes, the lipstick, the spring in her step, and the wedding ring of course. Apparently, it is the lack of communication between Sunita and Akash that forces her to seek comfort in the arms of man who is ten years her junior. Emotionally, she is not fulfilled and her loneliness is quite clear in her strange question to Deepak, “ ‘The question is, do you need her because you love her? Or, do you love her because she needs you?’ ” (Syal 173).

Sunita's love for books is not because of her love for knowledge, rather she seeks comfort from her claustrophobic life through these books. “It made her feel better to know there were people worse off than herself. Maybe one day, she could even help Akash in his work, What she really wanted was to find on some page, in some paragraph, a description of someone who felt exactly as she did. Then she would know she was not alone.” (Syal 172) She

tries to unburden herself by equating her miseries with the characters in the books. The names of books– Psycho-Sexual Counselling: A Journey; If you are not listening, Why Am I Still Talking?; Women and Fear: Dare you Read the Truth? Mind Sex! The Big O Revealed!; The Politics of Snogging–bare open Sunita’s psychology. “Platonic Smooch”, “Kiss-Off”, “Passionate Pout”, “Dramatic Mwaah!”, and “Maternal Pucker” are among various chapters she reads clearly reflect upon her desire for sex too. Akash comes to know about what she wants from him and what he has forgotten to give her when he gets a chance to read her observations alone.

He is surprised to see his name in bold letters next to paragraphs such as “ ‘Sexual withdrawal, far from being a passive act, is in fact a deliberate and aggressive act, conscious or not’, or ‘Beware the eternally reasonable partner who seeks to make you into the unreasonable neurotic reactor’ ... ” (Syal 210). Sunita’s readings of “The Sita Complex”, “Patriarchy Made Divine”, and “The Role of the Hermaphrodite” confirm her belief that stoicism is always expected of the good wife in this patriarchal power structure. Akash is astonished at “Was this how she saw herself, the woman who just hours ago had shimmied out of the door in a silver handkerchief singing to the world she was randy?” (Syal 211) and is somewhat irritated at all this. In his opinion, she could have mentioned “The Superman Myth” in place of “The Sita Complex”. After reading and re-reading all her observations, he remarks, “ ‘We can’t all be flute-playing charmers with the universe in our mouths’ ” (Syal 211). Life is not all favourable, we must accept the unfavourable conditions too. This is what he also wants Sunita to think about and this is what the title of the novel, *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee* signifies.

Meera Syal has not forgotten to talk about the old-days values and how the relationships used to exist with much more warmth in those days. Sunita’s Mata-ji sets an ideal example of

old-days values in deep contrast to today's humdrum life. Her husband is dead, yet she feels fulfilled as she says that she has given all of herself to him.

She felt sorry for them; all this busy-busy lifestyle and pressure of work, so little time to enjoy. Of course she had worked hard all her life, but her tasks were finite Everything had had its place, and nothing had interfered with that. When she had broken all her bangles on the stones around her husband's funeral pyre, crashing her wrists against flint, even then, she had felt fulfilled. She had given all of herself to him. He was on his way, on to the next stage. Now she was alone and free to recall him whenever she wished. (Syal 276)

Sunita has everything—a loving husband, two sweet children, yet she is not contented with her life. She also wants to share with Akash how the lack of communication in their marriage had led her to seek comfort elsewhere. But their goodness lies in the fact that with the passage of time, all the silences disappear and the life is smooth once again. Akash takes her off for a romantic weekend to Barcelona and Nikki has lost her first tooth. Deepak is nobody's—neither Chila's nor Tania's. Tania is left alone at the end whereas Chila's travel agent advises her that it is monsoon season in India to which she replies she doesn't mind rain. Apparently, Chila decides to live in India with her son, Anand. The three friends, who seemed to be one, are now scattered leaves.

Apart from the life-story of three friends, the novel is full of so many other things that seek our serious attention. "Indianness" has always been Meera Syal's favourite subject in all her novels and in this novel too, she has talked about the Indian belief-system, superstitions, customs, its rich cultural heritage, and tradition etc. She has also connected her characters to Indian myths i.e., Sunita is seen reading "The Sita Complex" in order to give vent to her own sufferings.

... and due to this, the deeply embedded image of Sita's sacrifice through fire to prove her worth, many Indian women subconsciously equate marriage and partnership with trial and suffering. Indeed, they expect it, welcome it as a proof of a virtuous liaison, blessed by tradition. Stoicism in the face of extreme pain is expected of the good wife ... (Syal 210-11)

By reading and re-reading this myth, Sunita tries to lessen her grief thinking stoicism has always been expected of the good wife for ages; even goddess Sita was not spared. Evidently, the spirit of sacrifice among Indian women is also highlighted. There is a mention of Indian ways of thinking and the superstitions about which we usually hear in our houses. ““Or don't step over anyone on the door or you'll stunt their growth. A woman with a second toe bigger than her first will dominate her husband, left-handed people bring bad luck, never count the number of chapattis anyone eats, keep away from widows because they're cursed, aren't they?” ” (Syal 295) A pregnant woman is given much more care and respect in Indian society as it is said when a woman gives birth to a child, she has one foot in death. “ ‘You see, a new mother is made to stay in her bed for forty days. No getting up, only eating the finest food, full of sugar and butter, nothing to do but wait for blessings and feed your son.’ ” (Syal 293) Moreover as per Indian superstitions, nothing is made ready or bought for the baby before it actually arrives, in case unseen forces i.e., fate or God notice we are too happy, and decide to teach us a lesson in humility by taking it away. “The Evil Eye or Nazar Lagna” has always been a major threat for all those Indian mothers who are too protective for their little children. They would spit, hold their earlobes in penitence and beg forgiveness from the skies. ““Nazar nahin lagthe! Don't tempt the evil eye.’ ” (Syal 238)

There is also a satire on sex-discrimination in the novel. Son is always given priority over daughter in our Indian society. The radiographer's remark to Chila, ““well, you see with our ... Asian ladies, we tend not to reveal the sex. It's just, we had a number of the ladies

afterwards requesting ... terminations, when they found out they were carrying girls' ” (Syal 230) confronts us with the dark face of Indian society. Syal's third novel, *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015) also satirizes the cases of abortion and female foeticide.

The novel also throws light on the miserable plight of old people; how they just turn into objects and are thrown out of houses when they are no more capable of making money for their kids. Sunita considers her Mata-ji lucky in this case. Her daughter-in-law is a gem who has never made her feel like a burdensome widow. She has her own room, fan, heater, and her own radio permanently tuned to a station that plays non-stop bhajans. Whereas, some of her unfortunate friends have to bear torture at the hands of their sons and daughters-in-law. Their sons use them as unpaid babysitters and cooks, and daughters-in-law lock up the phone and pantry when they leave them alone in the house. “To be old in this country was punishment enough. To then have to do bingo and ballroom dancing with other toothless persons was simply torture.” (Syal 275) The novel also teaches us that there is a big gap between our imagination and reality and three friends' life is evidence to it. Chila's imaginary world is torn into pieces when she sees Deepak in Tania's arms.

Odd, really, she had imagined that marriage would put an end to this division; no more giggles and whispers with other girls ... With a ring on your finger, everything would be above board and legitimate. You could move freely with a husband at your side, feel secure even around other men, knowing that they would be, henceforth, merely brothers to you. She liked that part of the wedding ceremony. It was a good theory, anyhow. (Syal 215)

This way, Chila's imaginary world is shattered by both Tania and Deepak. Sunita's disillusionment with marriage is also revealed in these words, “Maybe that's why they were all so constantly disappointed, disillusioned, disenchanted, that was the world. Because fairy tales always ended with a wedding. Whoever began a love story with ‘They had just got married ...’

” (Syal 309-10). Tania’s loneliness, in the end, is a harsh reality in contrast to her dream world of name and fame. It is pertinent to mention here that the cultural environment in which Tania lives is much more responsible for her alienation than she herself is. Since her childhood, she has been brought up in Britain though her parents had their roots in Ambala i.e., India. Tania’s ways might not be acceptable to Prem and her parents but she, solely, cannot be held responsible for this. It is not possible for an individual to escape the influence of culture and tradition of the land in which he or she is brought up and this is so in Tania’s case. Tania’s affair with her friend’s husband would have never been permissible as per Indian cultural values but in Britain, it is not a big deal to have extra-marital affair. The thought of stealing her friend’s husband could have been painful to her only if she had been living in India. Moreover, Chila’s reaction after she sees Tania in Deepak’s arms is not as much violent as it is always expected from a wife. Chila’s futile attempts at ringing up Tania and her presence at her (Tania’s) father’s funeral are a clear evidence that she still wants a relationship with Tania. Apparently, British culture has equally influenced the lives of these diasporic Indians. As they have been living in Britain for so long, they have freed themselves from some of traditional Indian values adopting British ways. Diasporic Indians, this way, are much more liberated in comparison to only Indians. And this is because of their confrontation with two cultures and two traditions. The liberal outlook of diasporic Indians living in Britain is further emphasized by Sunita’s affair with Dr Krishan Bedi. Sunita is a married woman with two children and still her affair with Bedi is not a matter of big concern as per British value system. The three friends might have sprung from Indian origin but they make their appearance in the novel as coloured by British culture. They might have attached to their roots but it would not be wrong to say that they are equally attached to the culture of hostland.

Thus, life is a cornucopia of choices and these choices – right or wrong – determine our destiny. The novel is a deep study into how human relationships can be maintained on the basis

of these choices. “Every relationship has its own invisible boundaries, its own internal rules. For some people, it’s never raising their voices in public; for others, it’s not using the sharp knives when the cutlery starts flying.” (Syal 234) So, the beauty of relationships lies in following their boundaries and rules, not in disobeying them.

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