

Anita and Me



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MEERA SYAL

Like her character Meena Kumar, Feroza Syal, the daughter of Indian immigrants, was born in a small mining town in central England. After studying English and Drama at the University of Manchester, she began acting and writing stage plays. These experiences led her to pursue a multi-faceted career as an actor, a journalist, and a writer for radio and television. However, it is her talents as a novelist that ultimately brought her fame, as her 1996 semi-autobiographical novel *Anita and Me* was published to critical acclaim. In 2017, Syal was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A central historical event mentioned in *Anita and Me* is the Partition of India, a process through which colonial British India was divided into the countries known today as India and Pakistan. Britain ruled over India from 1858 to 1947, until the Indians' struggle for independence forced the colonial power to leave shortly after the Second World War. In 1947, the British officially divided the country into separate territories defined in ethnic and religious terms: Pakistan was to become a Muslim country and India a Hindu one. This forced millions of people to move from one country to the next, through forced migration which was often accompanied by violent massacres, as people killed others because of their religious beliefs. As such, this episode remains a dark episode in Indian history, marking generations of Indian and Pakistani families.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Anita and Me is a typical "Bildungsroman," a novel that shows the protagonist's early years of personal growth. In this regard, *Anita and Me* shares many structural and thematic characteristics with Harper Lee's classic American novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is both directly and indirectly referenced in Syal's novel. Meena once gives this book as a gift to her friend Robert, and the "Big House" can be seen as a reference to recluse Boo Radley's house. More generally, both novels share thematic similarities. Like Harper Lee's protagonist, Meena learns to recognize injustice and battle racism. More recently, contemporary works that show characters struggling with potentially hostile environments tinged with exclusion and racism include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel [Americanah](#), Zadie Smith's [White Teeth](#), and [Brick Lane](#) by Monica Ali.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Anita and Me
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1996
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** An imaginary English village, Tollington, in central England in the 1970s.
- **Climax:** After hearing that Anita took part in the beating of an innocent Indian man, Meena semi-intentionally falls off a horse and breaks her leg.
- **Antagonist:** Anita Rutter often proves cruel and domineering, but, more generally, Meena's antagonists involve any kind of racism or intolerance, as represented by other characters such as Sam Lowbridge.
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Literary Popularity. *Anita and Me* was so successful after being published in 1996 that it was later adapted into a movie in 2002 and a musical drama in 2015.

Near-Death Experience. Like her characters Meena and Tracey, Meera Syal has also had a near-death experience as a child. She almost drowned when she was twelve after her canoe capsized and she stayed under water for thirty seconds, which felt much longer to her.



PLOT SUMMARY

Meera Syal's novel *Anita and Me* is set in the fictional English village of Tollington in the 1970s. It follows the life of nine-year-old Meena Kumar, the daughter of Indian immigrants, as she attempts to define her personal identity, marked by her Indian background and the small-town, English society in which she grows up.

At the beginning of the novel, Meena describes her earliest memories as her parents' arrival in India. However, she then admits that these are not actually her own memories, but that she enjoys this narrative because it makes her feel connected to her Indian background. She concludes that people like her need to lie about their identity to feel as though they belong somewhere.

The narrative then shifts to life in Tollington, as Meena is caught telling a lie to her father. She finally admits that she has indeed taken money from her mother to buy sweets at Mr. Ormerod's local shop. This scene, which leaves Meena's father furious, allows Meena to reflect on her family background.

Although Meena is close to her parents, who try to give her guidance and support, she often finds herself lying and wanting to rebel. In addition to her parents, her family includes a series of Indian acquaintances whom Meena calls “Aunties” and “Uncles”—friends who are not actually relatives but who come to Meena’s house on a regular basis. Although this community makes Meena feel loved, it also encourages her to conform to a typical image of an Indian girl: pleasant and polite. Meena, by contrast, wants to spend time outdoors and take part in physical activities.

Meena finds an outlet for these rebellious energies in her relationship with Anita Rutter, a local thirteen-year-old girl. Anita is known for being the leader of a group of two friends, Sherrie and Fat Sally. Meena notices that Anita always wants to create rivalries among her friends so that she can have power over them. However, Meena is fascinated by Anita’s capacity to speak her mind openly, however rude or vulgar her thoughts might be, and Meena soon becomes one of Anita’s followers. Meena knows that her conversations with Anita rarely allow her to talk sincerely, but she still considers Anita her friend and is honored to be spending time with an older girl. In addition, Meena finds that Sam Lowbridge, a sixteen-year-old boy who is considered the town rebel, is kind to her, despite their age difference.

In the meantime, Meena enjoys spending time with her family. One day, when Meena’s mother is driving her to another city, Meena hears a driver insult them, calling them “bloody wogs,” an offensive term for non-whites. This represents Meena’s first direct encounter with racism, and she feels a mix of emotions, from fear and anger to utter powerlessness. Although she wants to share this episode with her father, she realizes that he too must have suffered from racism in his life and does not want to burden him.

Weeks later, the day of Diwali arrives, the Hindu festival of lights. While Meena’s mother is preparing the dinner, Meena puts on her mother’s **diamond necklace** and goes with Anita to the fair. On the way, they pass the **Big House**, a scary building whose inhabitants no one has ever seen. At the fair, they join Sherrie and Sally and meet a group of boys. Anita seduces one of them, a boy called Dave “The Poet,” while Sherrie and Sally each choose a boy for themselves. Meena then realizes that Anita has not introduced her and that these boys do not even know her name. She also sees one of the boy’s show relief at being stuck with Fat Sally instead of her. This makes Meena feel terrible about herself, both because of Anita’s disregard and the boy’s racist attitude.

Meena comes home to the Diwali gathering, and after her father sings one of his beautiful Punjabi songs, Meena is asked to sing. She does so, but also mentions one of Anita’s vulgar sexual expressions, shocking her entire audience. She is told to go to her room and later hears her mother worrying about her, telling Auntie Shaila, their closest Indian acquaintance, that

Meena has been misbehaving a lot. Overwhelmed by all of these events, Meena secretly leaves the house to go back to the fair.

Meena meets up with Anita, and is then shocked to see Anita’s mother Deirdre kiss and run away with Dave, whom Anita had been kissing earlier. Meena and Anita, who did not see what happened, then walk toward the Big House. Anita enters through a hole in the fence and dares Meena to do the same. Although Meena is terrified, she wants to prove to Anita that she is courageous and obeys. As they walk around the dark yard, Meena is shocked to find a hidden statue of Ganesha. Anita and Meena are then chased off the property by an angry dog, and Meena loses her mother’s necklace in the process.

Back at home, Meena expects to be punished for leaving the house but discovers that her mother has had a medical problem and needs to go to the hospital. A few hours later, Meena’s mother gives birth to a baby boy, Sunil.

While her mother is in the hospital, Meena spends most of her time with Anita. The two of them convince younger children to form a gang. Meena initially enjoys their games but one day is shocked to see Anita and other young children pick on Anita’s sister, Tracey, ultimately making her run away and cry. Shocked by this public humiliation, Meena concludes that people cannot be trusted, as they turn on their friends to humiliate them. Before Tracey runs away, Meena notices bruises on Tracey’s thighs, suggesting that she is being sexually abused.

Meena herself soon finds herself involved in a harmful deed. After Meena and her two cousins Pinky and Baby accompany Anita to Mr. Ormerod’s shop, Anita encourages Meena to steal. Meena does so, stealing a tin can of charity money from the counter. When Mr. Ormerod later comes to Meena’s house to ask about the can, Meena tells her father that Baby took the money. Meena initially felt proud to have behaved recklessly and impressed Anita, but she now feels guilty, realizing that she has blamed others for her own misdeed.

When spring arrives, the entire village goes to Fete, a party organized by a rich villager, Mr. Pembridge, who donates the proceeds to charity. Tensions have been rising in the village after it was announced that a new motorway will be built, destroying sections of Tollington. After Mr. Pembridge mentions the motorway in a speech and a local reverend announces that, instead of using Fete’s money for charity, he will use it to repair the roof of the local church, Sam Lowbridge intervenes, loudly criticizing the project. Inspired by the crowd’s approval of his angry speech, he then expresses his hatred of “wogs,” drawing sounds of approval from a few people in the crowd. Meena, who has always had a friendly relationship with Sam, is shocked both by his behavior and by the fact that local villagers would agree with him. She suddenly realizes that some people harbor racist beliefs. As Meena walks away, Anita stops her, commenting on Sam’s good looks. Outraged, Meena calls Anita stupid, an event that causes the two girls to spend

time apart.

In the meantime, Meena's mother has been feeling depressed and overwhelmed by all her domestic duties, and in particular by having to take care of Sunil on her own. Nanima, Meena's maternal grandmother, soon arrives to help, revolutionizing Meena's family life. Through Nanima, Meena learns about life in India and discovers that Indian history is dramatic and fascinating. Although Meena has often felt ill at ease in English society, where she wonders if her skin is too brown for her to fit in, she now feels pride at her Indian heritage and wants to explore India for herself. She develops a loving relationship with Nanima, who, unlike Meena's parents, appreciates Meena's wild side.

However, Meena is soon reminded of the racist undertones of her own community. One day when Meena, Nanima, and Sunil are walking around Tollington, they run into Sam Lowbridge and his gang. A local Methodist youth leader, Uncle Alan, is remonstrating Sam for his racist attitude, encouraging him to use his energies to fight injustice in other ways. Meena becomes so furious at seeing Sam that she insults him and develops a fever.

After learning that Anita's mother Deirdre has abandoned her family, Meena has begun to feel pity for Anita, realizing that, despite Anita's domineering attitude, she might actually need their friendship more than Meena does. However, despite Meena's efforts to understand her, she soon realizes that Anita is even crueller than she thought. One day at Sherrie's farm, she overhears Anita tell Sherrie that she took part in a "Paki bashing," the beating of an innocent Indian man, with Sam Lowbridge, who is now her boyfriend. Shocked, Meena suddenly decides to mount Sherrie's horse to escape. However, Meena does not know how to control the animal, and she falls and breaks her leg.

This leads Meena to spend months at the hospital, providing her with a period of reflection in which she decides to alter her life radically. She resolves to distance herself from Anita's bad influence, to focus on her family, and to devote herself to her studies—in particular, the preparation of the **eleven-plus exam**, which might allow her to go to a good grammar school and move out of Tollington.

At the hospital, Meena also meets Robert, a young boy for whom she develops affection and feelings of love. Over the course of months, the two of them become close friends even though Robert suffers from a serious illness that forces him to stay in an isolation room. After Meena leaves the hospital, Robert's parents write to her, telling her that their son has died. In the meantime, Nanima has also returned to India. These two events prove traumatic for Meena. At the same time, though, they allow her to realize that the grief she feels at losing these two people is infinitely stronger than any feeling she has ever harbored for Anita. This convinces her that she should separate herself from Anita permanently.

Back at Tollington, Meena isolates herself to study for the eleven-plus exam. However, one night on the eve of the exam, when Meena's parents are out, Tracey comes knocking on Meena's door. She urges Meena to follow her, saying that someone is trying to kill her sister. Still worried about her exam the next day, Meena follows Tracey to the Big House. There, she sees Anita and Sam having sex—a physical act that Tracey has interpreted as violence. Unable to contain her rage at discovering that Anita actually *wants* to have sex with Sam, Tracey attacks her and the two run off, chasing each other.

Sam then calls out to Meena and tells her that he has always had feelings for her. Unable to reconcile this behavior with Sam's racism, Meena tries to communicate to him that he has hurt her feelings, but Sam argues that he only ever meant to target "others." As Meena struggles to explain to Sam that racism will inevitably hurt *her* as well, Tracey suddenly appears, running to attack Sam. In doing so, she accidentally falls in the pond.

Panicked and desperate for help, Meena goes to ring the doorbell of the Big House. When an old woman answers the door, Meena discovers that the woman's husband, the owner of the house, is an Indian man, who has lived isolated from the community all this time. In the end, Tracey survives her ordeal. When the police later interrogate Meena about what has happened, Meena tells the truth, explaining that it was an accident. She feels as though Sam, Anita, and Tracey have the potential to ruin her life and decides to stay away from them.

By the end of the novel, Meena succeeds at her eleven-plus exam and her family moves out of Tollington. The entire family is happy to move out of this community and to live in a new, more diverse neighborhood. Eager to say a few last words to Anita, Meena leaves her a note, but never receives any response.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Meena Kumar – Protagonist and narrator Meena is nine years old when *Anita and Me* begins. A daughter of Indian immigrants, she has grown up in the English village of Tollington and struggles to define her cultural identity. Her desire to rebel against traditional norms and conventions finds an outlet in her friendship with thirteen-year-old Anita, which also puts many of Meena's principles to test. With Anita, Meena takes part in some reckless behavior, defying her parents' authority by lying, stealing, and accusing others of her misdeeds. On other occasions, though, Meena proves deeply thoughtful and family-oriented. She often uses her imaginative powers—including lying—to protect her family members and demonstrate empathy for others, for example showing concern for Anita even when the older girl acts cruelly toward her. Meena also

proves courageous and high-minded in her efforts to fight racism and discrimination, as she stands up to others to defend her vision of justice. Ultimately, Meena demonstrates her self-confidence and ambition by working hard at school to pass **the eleven-plus exam** and leave Tollington. Marked by her mixed Indian and English backgrounds, by the end of the novel Meena eschews categories and concludes that she is free to choose however she wants to define her own identity.

Anita Rutter – Anita is a domineering, self-centered thirteen-year-old girl who enjoys manipulating the people around her. Although Anita initially seems to share certain personality traits with Meena, such as a desire to rebel and a love of the outdoors, she ultimately proves much more dishonest and cruel. Anita does not hesitate to humiliate others, including her own sister Tracey, to maintain her superiority over her group of friends. This disregard for other people's feelings expresses itself through intolerance, racism, and a predilection for violence. Anita, for example, is proud to take part in the beating of an innocent Indian bank manager, whom Sam Lowbridge's gang attacks for the simple fact of being a foreigner. Anita suffers from an abusive home environment, though it remains unclear if she suffers from the same sexual violence as Tracey. Anita's future looks bleak, and her obsession with sex suggests that she is likely to follow a similar path as her mother Deirdre, who ultimately abandons her children to run off with another man. In the absence of strong personal ambitions and a supportive environment, it seems likely that Anita will marry and have children at an early age.

Mrs. Kumar ("Mama") – Meena's mother is known in the Tollington community as a warm, kind, and beautiful person. She has a principle of being friendly with everyone, although she makes an exception for racist and intolerant people such as Deirdre, whom she treats with coldness. She is uncompromising when it comes to moral matters, and her daughter's lying makes her sad and furious. In addition, Mrs. Kumar is deeply committed to her family. She spends hours cooking meals to please her husband Mr. Kumar and has great faith in her daughter's goodness and intellectual capacities, despite Meena's occasional misbehavior. Meena's mother values family so much that she finds the lack of commitment between English children and parents unnatural and disturbing.

Mr. Kumar ("Papa") – Like his wife Mrs. Kumar, Meena's father is devoted to his family and wishes he were closer to his Indian parents, to be able to take care of them. He has an occasionally explosive personality, as he tends to express rage and frustration at Meena's bad behavior even when it relates to aspects of life that Meena cannot control, such as the vulgar words she hears in the street. He occasionally proves conservative, as he feels strongly about protecting his daughter from bad influences, in particularly coarse conversations about sex. Meena also notes that he has difficulty expressing his emotions, as he tends to become emotionally withdrawn when

he is sad, instead of openly letting his tears flow and feeling better.

Nanima – Meena's maternal grandmother is a joyful, caring person who takes an immediate liking to Meena. She recognizes her granddaughter as a wild, boisterous soul—perhaps just as mischievous as Nanima herself when she was young. Very talkative (though knowing no English), Nanima enjoys telling stories about India and plays an important role in making Meena proud of her Indian heritage. Meena believes that Nanima has the special powers of a sorceress, because she is extremely perceptive about people's behaviors, instinctively hating Anita and understanding that Meena is involved with the disappearance of **mama's necklace**. Nanima also proves capable of emotional healing, often comforting Meena by holding her and talking to her in Punjabi.

Sam Lowbridge – Sam Lowbridge already has a criminal record at the age of sixteen and is thus considered Tollington's rebel. He drives around the village with his gang on mopeds and intimidates little children, although he shows a sincere interest in Meena and often behaves kindly and protectively toward her. However, he soon proves racist and violent, as he publicly expresses racist views and takes part in the beating of an innocent Indian bank manager. These racist acts seem moved by ignorance and frustration more than a clear ideology, as Sam does not realize the consequences of his words. For example, he does not grasp that his words and actions might hurt Meena, who tries to explain to him that racism hurts everyone. Meena also notices that Sam is weak in another respect, as he seems trapped by his girlfriend Anita's manipulation.

Tracey Rutter – Emotionally vulnerable, shy, and discreet, Tracey is the complete opposite of her rebellious older sister Anita. Tracey apparently suffers from sexual violence, likely perpetrated by her father Roberto. Perhaps because of this, Tracey, unlike her sister, feels a visceral disgust for sex and often tries to protect her sister from being touched by other people. Tracey's concern for her sister's well-being leads her to hate Anita's boyfriend Sam Lowbridge. Her anger toward Sam leads her to attack him and almost drown in the **Big House** pond, though she ultimately survives. Later Tracy shows her vengeful side by accusing Sam and Anita of pushing her into the pond, even though it was an accident.

Robert – After breaking her leg, Meena meets Robert at the hospital, where he is confined to an isolation room and separated from Meena by a window. Robert is a boy who suffers from an unnamed, severe disease from which he ultimately dies. Robert is kind and funny, and he and Meena immediately become close friends. They share written notes across the window and invent a secret language so that people cannot understand them. When Meena goes to visit him in the isolation room, it becomes obvious that they have feelings for each other, and Robert calls Meena his girlfriend. Meena remains deeply affected by Robert's death, as she realizes that

she has never felt such intense sadness before.

Deirdre – Recognizable by her high heels and mini-skirts, Anita and Tracey’s mother is an unstable presence in her daughters’ lives. Her obsession with sex makes her behave in unscrupulous ways, as she has sex with Dave “The Poet,” whom Anita was going out with. Her lack of interest in taking care of her children also leads her to abandon her family to go live with her lover, a butcher. Deirdre also proves racist and vulgar, as she calls their family poodle “Nigger,” which shocks Meena’s family. However, Deirdre attempts to show some concern for Anita’s life when she asks Meena’s mother why Anita and Meena no longer spend time together—an episode that, in retrospect, Meena interprets as Deirdre’s plea for Meena to take care of Anita once she is gone.

Uncle Alan – The youth leader of the local Methodist church and teacher of the Sunday school Meena goes to, Uncle Alan is considered handsome and charming by most women in Tollington. He is also devoted to taking part in good social causes, such as organizing charity donations for children in Africa and keeping Sam Lowbridge from uttering racist ideas, encouraging him to direct his energy toward more constructive pursuits. He shows solidarity with Meena and Mr. Kumar after Sam’s racist speeches, and unlike Mr. Ormerod, he argues that people in developing countries should be given the freedom to choose their religion and way of life, since living a dignified life fulfills God’s will. This makes him the most progressive and outspoken member of the Tollington community.

Mr. Ormerod – The local shopkeeper is known for being gentle, talkative, and condescending toward foreign peoples. He proves close-minded about religious and social topics, and tries to convert everyone to Christianity. His views are largely patronizing, as he believes that poor foreigners should be taught English culture and “civilization” instead of merely being allowed to live in a dignified way. However, Mr. Ormerod behaves kindly toward Meena and her family. Like Sam Lowbridge, he seems unaware of the potential effects his racist beliefs can have on others.

Sherrie – The farmer’s daughter is one of Anita’s two best friends at the beginning of the novel. Meena finds Sherrie pretty and sometimes wishes she looked like her. When Sherrie receives a horse, Anita begins to spend most of her time with her at her farm. Although Sherrie does not have a clearly defined personality, she proves most willing to follow Anita’s decisions, for example making fun of the nuns at Fat Sally’s school and listening to Anita’s boasts about beating up the Indian bank manager. Sherrie’s family moves out of Tollington by the end of the novel, after her father is compensated for the invasion of the motorway on part of his farm.

Fat Sally – Although Fat Sally (a nickname everyone seems to use) is initially one of Anita’s two best friends, she later shows herself inclined to stand up to Anita and challenge the girl’s opinions. When Anita makes fun of Sally’s family’s wealth as

well as the nuns at Sally’s school, Sally grows vengeful and violent, physically attacking Anita by pulling off chunks of her hair. Sally apparently comes from a supportive family environment, and her mother occasionally tries to keep her away from Anita, whom she understands as a bad influence.

Mrs. Worrall – Meena’s family’s direct neighbor is kind, generous, and shows a strong interest in Meena’s happiness. Meena is soon impressed by Mrs. Worrall’s strength and endurance, as the older woman takes care of a severely sick husband without the help of any of her children, who have not come to visit her in years—a fact that makes Mrs. Worrall emblematic of the dysfunctional English families that Meena’s mother criticizes. Mrs. Worrall is the only villager who becomes close enough to Meena’s family to be invited to their farewell party when they prepare to leave Tollington.

Auntie Shaila – Auntie Shaila is the closest Auntie to Meena’s family, and is present at most family gatherings. Meena describes Auntie Shaila as “the fattest, noisiest, and most fun of all the Aunties.” Auntie Shaila behaves spontaneously and exuberantly, occasionally expressing secret opinions—such as the fact that Meena has a Birmingham accent when she speaks Punjabi—in too loud a manner.

Uncle Amman – Much quieter and self-effacing than his wife Auntie Shaila, Uncle Amman is the first person Meena’s father meets in England. Generous and kind, he helps papa become accustomed to England. He has a heart attack at the end of the novel, which forces Meena’s parents to leave the house on the evening before Meena’s **eleven-plus exam**.

Mr. Turvey (“Mr. Topsy”) – Meena nicknames this neighbor “Mr. Topsy” because he insists on calling her “Topsy,” which he claims is easier to pronounce than her real name. Mr. Topsy—whose real name is Mr. Turvey—speaks Punjabi and impresses everyone by communicating with Nanima. Instead of lauding Britain’s colonial enterprise, he proves thoughtful and compassionate by admitting that Britain’s actions in India were criminal, but that Indians are wonderful people. He becomes an example of the way in which having direct contact with people’s history breeds tolerance and generosity.

Mr. Christmas – A Tollington villager whose wife Mrs. Christmas soon dies of cancer. He remonstrates Anita and Meena for screaming in the entry by his house and threatens to talk to their mothers about it. He is also mentally unstable, as he leaves his wife’s body in the house for weeks after she has died. He dies three weeks after his wife.

Hairy Neddy – Anita’s neighbor is given this nickname because of the extensive facial hair he has when he first moves to Tollington, a time during which he also has a rock band. He is the village’s only bachelor and soon becomes romantically involved with his neighbor Sandy, with whom he later gets married. He is kind and charismatic, capable of convincing people to buy Sandy’s artisanal stuffed animals to make her

business more successful.

Harinder P. Singh (“Harry”) – The mysterious owner of **the Big House** is revealed to be Indian, which surprises Meena and her family, since they only discover this near the end of the novel. After studying at Cambridge, where he met his wife Mireille, he inherited money and decided to buy a house in Tollington, when the area was still green and peaceful. He is cordial and generous, giving Meena’s father advice about the real estate market.

Rajesh Bhatra (“The Indian Bank Manager”) – This Indian man, who Meena thinks looks like a bank manager, works for the men in charge of building the motorway that passes through Tollington. Meena feels an instinctive affinity toward him because both of them are Indian. Anita and Sam Lowbridge take part in the collective robbing and beating of this man. This racially motivated crime leaves Mr. Bhatra severely injured and motivates Meena and her parents to move out of Tollington.

The fortune teller – This woman, whom Meena calls the Mysterious Stranger, gives Meena and Anita accurate predictions about their future, foreseeing challenges but success for Meena and a mediocre lifestyle for Anita, whom she predicts will likely become pregnant at an early age. She also warns Meena about her relationship with Anita, ironically noting that Anita is not Meena’s friend.

Sunil Meena’s younger brother, who is born in the middle of the book. Meena is initially jealous of her brother, who gets all of Mama’s attention (even other characters think that Sunil is too dependent on Mama). But after Nanima arrives, Sunil begins to be a bit more independent, and Meena grows to love her brother.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Worrall – Mrs. Worrall’s sick husband is unable to move or communicate. However, despite not understanding Punjabi, he immediately connects with Nanima and Meena concludes that the two old people understand each other through their grunts.

Roberto – Anita and Tracey’s father’s personality remains largely unknown. He works at a tire factory and is probably the author of the sexual violence against Tracey, although this remains undetermined.

Mrs. Christmas – Mrs. Christmas, who is sick of cancer, behaves kindly toward Meena. She also generously donates her clothing, as she knows that she is soon going to die.

Sandy – A divorcée, Sandy soon shows interest in Hairy Neddy and tries to seduce him in various ways. It is only after she gives up on this pursuit that Hairy Neddy reciprocates, ultimately asking her to marry him.

Mireille – Mr. Singh’s wife welcomes Meena into her house after Meena tells her that Tracey has fallen into the pond. Although Meena initially believes that Mireille is a witch, the

old woman proves extremely talkative and affectionate, sharing with Meena the story of her life.

Pinky – One of Auntie Shaila’s daughters and Meena’s “cousins,” Pinky is sweet and gentle. Although Meena initially enjoys spending time with her and her sister Baby, she later finds them too boring.

Baby – Pinky’s sister, one of Auntie Shaila’s daughters and Meena’s “cousins.” Meena steals Mr. Ormerod’s can of money in Pinky and Baby’s presence and then accuses Baby of this misdeed. The girls prove too shy and guilt-ridden to defend themselves.

Kevin and Karl – These young twins, whom Meena describes as hyperactive, form part of Anita and Meena’s gang. They are cruel and inclined to humiliate others, as they make fun of Tracey.

Glenys – Sam Lowbridge’s mother is the oldest single mother in Tollington. Meena’s mother disapproves of Glenys’s habits, which involve smoking and playing bingo. Glenys seems detached from her son’s life, having little control over his actions and little knowledge of his whereabouts.

Dadaji – Meena’s paternal grandfather was a staunch communist who kept papa from having an acting career because he believed people should devote their lives to politics, not entertainment. His anti-religious views affected Meena’s father, who believes that people should act in the name of humanity, not religion.

Nanaji – Nanima’s husband and Meena’s maternal grandfather, he only appears in photographs and in Nanima’s stories. During British colonization in India, he was committed enough to his principles to refuse to fight in the British army, which caused him to be sent to prison.

Dadima – Meena’s paternal grandmother, a kind-looking lady whose face is marked by suffering, only appears in photographs.

Dave “The Poet” – A boy whom Anita meets at the fair and begins to go out with. He abandons Anita, whom he was kissing minutes earlier, to go have sex with her mother Deirdre.

Tonio – A member of Dave’s group of friends, Tonio spends time with Sherrie at the fair, kissing her.

Gary – A member of Dave’s group of friends, Gary spends time with Fat Sally at the fair. Although he is initially disappointed to be stuck with Sally, whom he perceives as unattractive, he later shows relief not to be matched with Meena, thus revealing his racist views.

Jodie Bagshot – A four-year-old girl who went missing for three days and was later found to have drowned accidentally in **the Big House** pond.

Cara Mitchell – Cara, a young woman in Tollington, shows signs of mental illness, and is sent to a psychiatric institution against

her parents' will. This shocks Meena, who believes that the girl needs open spaces instead of being locked up in a cell.

Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell – Meena calls Cara's parents the "Mad Mitchells." Of humble economic means, they live in a cluttered house next to Meena's family.

Mr. Pembridge – A local Tory councilor and businessman, Mr. Pembridge lives in a mansion in Tollington. He opens his house's gates every spring for Fete, in which local artisans can sell their products and donate to charity. He gives lofty speeches in an authoritative manner.

Beryl Pembridge – Mr. Pembridge's wife proves infinitely less elegant and refined than her husband. She speaks in a miner's accent and embarrasses her husband by behaving drunkenly at Fete.

Reverend Ince – The church vicar gets into an argument with Uncle Alan at Fete about how to spend the money they have collected. He acts selfishly in his decision to use the money raised to repair the church roof.

Sylvie – A kind nurse at the hospital who helps Meena enter into Robert's isolation room and talk to him face-to-face for the first and only time.

in a person's life: family can provide the foundation for an individual to achieve success, or, on the other hand, it can undermine children from reaching their full potential.

Encouraged to behave in a way that her parents and their Indian friends approve of, Meena often feels stifled in her own family. Her father, for instance, criticizes her for finding Indian girls boring, even though they are "polite and sweet and enjoy spending time with their family." Meena, by contrast, finds these girls' restrained behavior unappealing. Unlike them, she enjoys spending time outdoors, taking part in physical activities and exploring nature, and is unafraid to get her clothes dirty.

Anita, meanwhile, is exactly the opposite of what typical Indian girls are supposed to be. She spends most of her time outside her house, takes part in harmful, potentially illegal activities, and uses vulgar language. This can be seen as a reproduction of her family environment, as Anita imitates her mother Deirdre's offensive language—her mother calls their family dog "Nigger"—and reckless sexual behavior. Although Meena does not understand much about sex, she is attracted to Anita's life, which seems so exciting in comparison to her own.

These two environments clash when Meena uses a vulgar sexual expression in front of her entire Indian circle. Although Meena does not understand what the expression actually means, since she is merely repeating Anita's words, her family's shock and anger make Meena feel ashamed. Meena's shame suggests that she *knows* that aspects of Anita's life are morally reprehensible, and that her family might be right in setting limits to what can be said and done. Meena eventually realizes that though her family's discipline might feel oppressive at times, it actually has helped her become a better person. By contrast, as Anita's family falls apart, it becomes apparent that she does not benefit from any adult's support. The girls' life paths ultimately demonstrate the powerful role that family can play in young people's lives.

Meena knows that Mama and Papa's worries are not motivated by a desire to keep their daughter from enjoying her freedom but, rather, by a concern for her well-being and happiness. Papa often worries about Meena turning from a happy child into "some rude, sulky monster." Meena also realizes that even her Aunts and Uncles' recriminations make her feel "safe and wanted," even if she does not necessarily agree with their various critiques. By contrast, Anita and her sister Tracey's home is defined by violence and neglect. One day, Meena notices bruises on the inside of Tracey's thighs that show the imprint of ten fingers. These signs indicate the presence of violence—and probably sexual violence—in the young girl's life. Later, when Anita and Tracey's mother abandons them to run away with another man, Deirdre's actions prove how little concern she has for her daughters' well-being. This combination of abuse and neglect marks Anita and Tracey's lives. While Tracey's reaction is to be extremely shy and fear anything that has to do with sex, Anita reacts in the opposite



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FAMILY DISCIPLINE AND GUIDANCE

Set in the fictional English village of Tollington in the 1970s, *Anita and Me* explores the relationship between Meena Kumar, a nine-year-old girl whose parents are recent Indian immigrants, and Anita Rutter, a twelve-year-old white girl, born and bred in Tollington. Meena grows up in a tight-knit family composed of Mama, Papa, and her young brother Sunil, as well as an extended "family" of Aunts and Uncles—fellow Indian immigrants who are not related to Meena's family but who spend most of their time with them. Growing up, Meena is often resentful of expectations that she behave like a typical Indian girl: polite and quiet. Meena enjoys spending time with Anita in large part because the older girl's family seemingly allows her to live more freely. However, over time, Meena realizes that her own family's rules and discipline are an expression of love, providing her with the support she needs to become a successful adult, whereas Anita's lack of family guidance leaves her on her own and with few prospects. By highlighting the two girls' divergent paths, the novel illustrates the importance that family can have

way, by taking part in reckless sexual behavior. Both girls' behaviors reflect how little guidance and support they have.

By the end of the novel, Meena realizes that her family's loving environment will allow her to escape Tollington and lead the life she chooses. After breaking her leg and spending time in hospital, Meena decides to focus on her studies, preparing for the eleven-plus exam. She benefits from her family's full support in this decision. Mama has no doubt that Meena will succeed and resolves that they should use this opportunity to leave Tollington to move closer to Meena's future school. Ultimately, Meena learns to embrace the attitude of a typical, studious Indian girl, while concluding that this does not necessarily involve abandoning her personality. Rather, she understands that this is the first step in working hard to build a successful, fulfilling life for herself—something her family has been encouraging her to do all along.

Ultimately, Meena realizes that her parents' love has benefited her more than it has harmed her. By the end of the novel, Meena is moving on—out of childhood, out of Tollington, and into the future. Anita, by contrast, seems bound to remain within the narrow confines of Tollington and her low ambitions: she remains obsessed with sex and having a boyfriend, and is commonly judged as likely to soon have children of her own—thus propagating her unstable family legacy instead of breaking away from it.



FRIENDSHIP

Nine-year-old Meena's life changes radically when she develops a friendship with Anita Rutter, a local girl who is three years older than her. Although

Meena initially benefits from spending time with Anita, she soon discovers that this older girl is more interested in dominating others than in establishing sincere, reciprocal relationships. It is only once Meena meets Robert, a young boy she falls in love with, that she realizes that genuinely meaningful relationships are based on mutual care and respect, not on self-interest and subordination. The novel thus shows that relationships fraught with competition and inequality can never be true friendships.

When Meena first gets to know Anita, she believes that the two of them have traits in common that predispose them to become friends. However, over time, Meena realizes that Anita will never treat her as an equal, and that her relationship with Anita will always involve bowing to the older girl's desires. Meena initially describes her relationship with Anita as grounded in mutual recognition. Meena believes that Anita looks at her with "the recognition of a kindred spirit, another mad bad girl trapped inside a superficially obedient body." Anita thus gives Meena the opportunity to express an aspect of her personality that she cannot develop in the occasionally stifling atmosphere of her own family. Together, they seem bound to lead a joyous, rebellious life.

However, Meena soon realizes that Anita's friendships always involve domination and exclusion. When Anita walks around with Sherrie and a girl everyone calls Fat Sally, her two closest friends, she always makes sure to lock arms with only one of them while the other is forced to trail behind, thus "play[ing] one girlfriend against the other." When Meena joins their group, she often experiences this exclusion herself. After the group meets some boys at a fair, Anita introduces Sherrie and Fat Sally to them but does not bother to present Meena, thus making the young girl feel excluded and forced to leave. This domineering behavior allows Anita to manipulate the people around her into wanting to win her favor. Anita thus proves more interested in bossing people around than in engaging in heartfelt, committed friendships.

Nevertheless, like Sherrie and Fat Sally before her, Meena finds herself bowing to Anita's demands. She spends her time listening to Anita instead of expressing her own thoughts and learns to adapt to Anita's mood swings, some of which erupt into full-blown anger and a desire to cause others harm. When Anita publicly humiliates her sister, forcing her to pee in front of everyone and then mocking her, causing the young girl to cry and run away, Meena realizes how easily Anita can turn against her so-called friends (or even family members). Meena doesn't leave their friendship after this realization, however—instead, she just learns to protect herself against Anita's moods. She finds Anita so captivating that she cannot let go of her bad influence.

Over time, though, Meena finally comes to terms with the fact that her relationship with Anita is grounded not in sincere mutual understanding, but in other emotions such as pity. Part of Meena's affinity toward Anita comes from her realization that, despite behaving cruelly, Anita is the victim of cruel circumstances herself. When Meena realizes that Anita's belief that her mother Deirdre will one day buy her a pony is nothing but a lie, Meena concludes that there is "a fine line between love and pity and I had just stepped over it." Meena understands that, despite acting tough, Anita holds on to some naïve illusions, such as the idea that her mother is trustworthy, when in fact Deirdre soon abandons her forever. In this moment, Meena concludes that Anita might need this friendship even more than Meena does, and resolves to protect her friend from emotional pain as much as she can.

After Meena breaks her leg, she meets Robert at the hospital, a young boy for whom Meena soon feels sincere love and affection. This relationship allows her to realize for the first time what genuine friendship between peers looks like. Robert is so ill that he stays in his own isolation room. However, across the window, they share exciting written conversations and invent a language of their own, so that other people might not understand them. They become so deeply attuned to each other's thoughts and emotions that they can communicate wordlessly. When Robert dies as a result of his illness, the

sadness that Meena feels after his death causes her to realize that she has never harbored such strong emotions for Anita, and, therefore, that the two girls' relationship is probably more superficial than she realized. While Anita shows little interest in Meena's feelings and often exploits Meena's rebelliousness to take part in harmful deeds like shoplifting, Nanima expresses her love for Meena by comforting her when she is feeling unwell, illustrating that true friendship should be selfless, based on mutual exchange.

These new experiences help Meena realize that she is better off distancing herself from Anita, who has always been more interested in using her than in protecting her. When Meena moves out of Tollington, she leaves Anita a goodbye note, but Anita never replies, confirming that their friendship had always been one-sided. Meena thus concludes that she is better off forgetting about Anita and embarking on a path of her own, defined by individual strength and self-reliance.



CULTURE AND BELONGING

Growing up as a second-generation Indian immigrant in England causes Meena to reflect on her cultural roots. Although she enjoys the atmosphere of Tollington, she realizes that she will never feel fully English because her family background makes her feel connected to India, and she is not accepted as fully English by many of the white people she lives among. At the same time, Meena has never been to India, and it is only once she meets Nanima, her maternal grandmother, that she begins to feel curious about Indian culture and history. As a result of these experiences, Meena defines her identity as a hybrid combination of two cultural backgrounds: English and Indian. The novel thus eschews rigid categories in favor of a more holistic understanding of belonging based on one individual's unique experience. Meena understands that culture and identity are primarily driven by love—love of her family, her history, and her own self. Through love and confidence, the novel suggests, one is free to define oneself however one chooses.

Meena grows up realizing that her identity is not clear-cut. Although she feels English, her family life is a constant reminder that she is related to another country, India. At the same time, Meena's ignorance of what India is actually like causes her to create an imaginary identity for herself based on longing and fantasy. Meena sometimes lies to people about her status and origins, telling children that she is a Punjabi princess who owns an elephant. She describes lying as a way for her to create meaning from her immigrant background, which remains mysterious to her. "I'm really not a liar," she asserts, "I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong." Meena thus constructs her cultural identity around a desire to connect with a place she does not fully know. When

she hears her father sing in Punjabi, she says, "The songs made me realize that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England." Meena thus discovers that her identity will always be divided between her Indian family's life and her English habits.

Nanima's arrival marks a turning point in Meena's life, giving the young girl greater pride and love for her Indian background. From this point on, Meena develops a deep yearning to discover India for herself. As Nanima tells stories about their family history, Meena's attitude toward India shifts from one of shame and fantasy to one of pride and fascination. At school, Meena has learned about Indian history only through the lens of British colonization, as though Indians had no glorious history of their own. By contrast, when she listens to Nanima's stories, Meena and the rest of the family learn about the British occupation as seen through the eyes of the colonized. Nanima explains that British soldiers once stole her family's chickens and sent a relative to prison for refusing to fight in their army. Meena becomes captivated by these anecdotes and finds that India "seemed full to bursting with excitement, drama and passion, history in the making, and for the first time I desperately wanted to visit India and claim some of this magic as mine."

This appreciation of India becomes more complex when Meena discovers that her parents harbor equal love and resentment toward their native country. Mama mentions the corruption that keeps poor Indians from receiving a good education, since succeeding at university usually involves bribing officials. Mama considers Britain much better in this regard and feels grateful that her children will benefit from these educational opportunities. This dual vision of India, as a country full of glory and problems, further piques Meena's interest, making her realize that India is a living, breathing place that she could explore, not a distant fantasy land.

These various events cause Meena to reject traditional categories and to decide that she is free to define her own identity as she chooses, accepting herself as a combination of diverse experiences. Meena often subverts people's expectations of what it means to be Indian—or what it means to be English. When Robert hears Meena speak, he is surprised by her accent: "yow'm a red Midland wench, our Meena! I thought you'd sound a bit more exotic than this!" His amused reaction highlights that Meena cannot be contained within a single category, and is at once Indian and British.

By the end of the novel, Meena concludes that her love for her family and herself are the main drivers of identity, more than superficial characteristics such as attitude and accent. As she works hard for her **eleven-plus exam**, she builds crucial self-confidence, making her aware of the infinite possibilities that lie before her: "I now knew I was not a bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or no place. The place in which I belonged was wherever I stood and there was nothing stopping me simply

moving forward and claiming each resting place as home.” One’s identity, the novel concludes, is wherever one chooses to call home.



RACISM AND VIOLENCE

Nine-year-old Meena grows up in the small English village of Tollington, which she initially finds to be warm and welcoming. However, when economic changes rock the region and Tollington’s peace is threatened by the construction of a motorway, Meena realizes that some villagers harbor resentment for their working-class lives. Frustrated by a system that keeps them from thriving economically, these people seek scapegoats—which they find in non-white people, including recent immigrants like Meena’s family. When Meena becomes aware of the racism that surrounds her, she is profoundly shocked to feel unsafe and unwanted in her own community. What’s more, she discovers that many people—such as the popular teen Sam Lowbridge—don’t even realize the impact that their prejudice can have. The novel thus emphasizes that racism is often the result of frustration and ignorance as much as actively-considered hatred. Such prejudice is no less harmful, however, and the novel ultimately suggests that education plays a crucial role in building tolerant communities.

Meena, who feels relatively comfortable in Tollington, soon realizes that some people around her look down on non-whites. Meena is later shocked to realize that her own neighbors might also harbor racist ideas. At Tollington’s Spring Fete, Sam Lowbridge interrupts public speeches to express his anger at using the money raised to donate to charitable causes. He uses this opportunity to express his hatred toward non-whites, angrily saying that “This is our patch. Not some wogs’ handout.” These ideas, as well as the use of the term “wog”—an offensive term for someone who is not white—shock Meena.

Disappointed with Sam’s attitude, Meena is even more shocked to hear people in the crowd express approval of Sam’s ideas. This marks a turning point in Meena’s life, as it causes her to re-evaluate her status in the community. She becomes suspicious of everyone’s motives and begins to nurture anger and disappointment of her own, directed toward racist individuals.

Racist words and behaviors make Meena painfully aware of the differences that separate her from the rest of the Tollington community. At the same time, though, Meena also discovers that people’s racist comments are not necessarily directed toward the non-white people they actually *know*: instead, such racism might be their only way to express general feelings of frustration and injustice.

Some people seem unaware of the deleterious effects of racism and are not necessarily intent on causing harm. Sam, who has given racist speeches and took part in the beating of an Indian bank manager in the street, appears genuinely confused by Meena’s anger toward him for these hateful actions. At the end

of the novel, when he forces Meena to speak to him, he tries to argue that his racist ideas have always been directed toward “the others,” not toward Meena herself, whom he appreciates greatly. However, Meena argues that, to people who do not know her, *she* could have been the bank manager they beat up. Therefore, “I *am* the others, Sam. You did mean me,” she explains.

In light of Sam’s bewilderment, the novel suggests that racism can derive from both ignorance and anger. Meena once hears Uncle Alan, a youth leader from the Methodist church, give Sam and his friends a moral speech: “just think if you could use all that energy to do some good. Find out who the real enemies are, the rich, the privileged, not the other people trying to make a living like you.” Uncle Alan tries to show Sam that his hatred of non-whites is the result of finding himself in a powerless social and economic position—a situation that causes him to seek scapegoats instead of addressing the roots of the problem: economic inequality and injustice. Alan argues that immigrants cannot be at fault for white people’s frustration, since immigrants are in the same vulnerable situation as the white working class. Racism, then, is often nothing but a fruitless effort at venting one’s pent-up frustrations.

Through her family’s conversations, Meena also discovers that the root causes for immigration lie in the British Empire’s actions. The British colonization of India caused India to experience a variety of social, economic, and political problems, which have ultimately led people like Meena’s parents to flee the country in search of better opportunities. Some English people’s ignorance of this aspect of history keeps them from realizing that their own nation is at least partially responsible for the immigration of non-whites to Britain. Mr. Topsy serves as a prime example that understanding people’s backgrounds builds intercultural trust and respect. After serving in the British army for ten years in India, Mr. Topsy speaks Punjabi and calls the British rule there “ugly” and “criminal.” He shows great respect toward Nanima, adding that he loved the Indian people. His direct participation in history makes him greatly aware of the difficult circumstances that people like Meena’s family have had to endure, and makes him more welcoming of these people in his own country. This episode suggests that such in-depth understanding of history has the potential to play an important role in fighting resentment and racism.

Although racist comments and behaviors hurt Meena to the core, making her feel alienated and unsafe in her own village, she realizes that some of these attitudes are simply the result of white people not understanding the complex circumstances that lead to immigration—that is, the result of ignorance. The novel concludes that people like Sam’s gang are sometimes more interested in seeking easy answers to their problems by placing responsibility for their problems on immigrants and non-whites, instead of reflecting on the complex issues at the root of their frustration.



TRUTH VS. LIES

Meena tells many lies throughout *Anita and Me*. Some of these lies are selfishly meant to conceal misdeeds and avoid punishment. Other lies,

however, are intended to protect Meena's family and keep her loved ones from harm, and as such can be seen as a useful tool to achieve a greater good. Meena thus struggles with the morality of lying throughout the novel, unsure of when it is acceptable to bend the truth. Meena's honesty is ultimately tested after Tracey accidentally falls into a pond and nearly drowns, and Meena has the opportunity to falsely accuse Sam and Anita—both of whom have wronged her—of pushing Tracey in. Meena chooses to tell the truth, however, and this final act of honesty reveals both her personal growth and newfound awareness of the moral consequences of her actions. The novel thus suggests that lying is not morally reprehensible in *all* situations, but that it should not be used to harm others; instead, one's goal should always be to defend justice and fairness.

The novel distinguishes between different types of lies, revealing that not all are equally harmful, and, in fact, can even reveal certain truths about the characters who tell them. Lies can attempt to compensate for something that does not exist. For example, when Anita tells Meena that the man on the poster on Mr. Ormerod's shop is her father, she is trying to manipulate Meena in order to make the young girl admire her. This is not necessarily a noble goal, but it does not directly cause Meena harm. Rather, it reveals Anita's own insecurities, showing that Anita lies to hide certain aspects of her dysfunctional and disappointing family life.

In turn, Meena, too, lies to protect her family. When Anita comes over for a meal and is shocked to discover that Meena and her parents eat with their fingers, Meena, who is annoyed by her friend's rude behavior, tells her that they always eat with their fingers even in the fanciest restaurants. This keeps Anita from making any comment and makes Meena's parents laugh. For once, Meena realizes, her parents are not dissatisfied by their daughter's lying, but feel grateful to her for defending them. Lying here is a harmless act meant to protect Meena's family, further complicating the notion of dishonesty as being inherently bad.

On the other hand, lies told in an effort to avoid punishment are presented as generally immoral, as they usually have a negative effect on other people and stand in the way of justice. At the beginning of the novel, Meena's lies are often aimed at self-protection and unconcerned with ideals of honesty and justice. The novel opens, for instance, with Meena lying to her Papa about using Mama's money to buy sweets from Mr. Ormerod's shop. Confronted with the threat of accompanying her father to ask Mr. Ormerod what truly happened, Meena finally admits that she did indeed take money from her mother. Her decision to lie only lasted insofar as she could avoid her father's wrath

and disapproval. It is only once she saw that she could not avoid punishment and confrontation that she decided to be honest.

An incident with Meena's cousins Pinky and Baby further highlights the dangers of lying to avoid punishment. When Meena, Anita, and the two cousins go to Mr. Ormerod's shop, Meena steals a jar full of money. Papa later confronts his daughter about what has happened, but Meena insists that the two cousins are responsible for this misdeed. Pinky and Baby's shyness, translating as an inability to defend themselves, protects Meena but gets them unfairly punished. Instead of feeling guilty, Meena is relieved not to have been caught. This situation reveals Anita's negative influence on Meena, as it becomes apparent that Meena has used more vulnerable girls as scapegoats, in the same way that Anita manipulates younger children—including Meena herself—to feel powerful.

Despite Meena's past behavior, by the end of the novel she realizes that telling the truth is the only valid option when the wellbeing of others is at stake. Meena finds herself deeply affected by people's racist comments, and she begins to understand the harmful effects that people's actions can have on others. This causes her to reflect on her own behavior, and she becomes aware that she was wrong in accusing Pinky and Baby of stealing Mr. Ormerod's money. For the first time in years, she prays to God, asking for forgiveness, thus demonstrating that she still retains a strong moral conscience, despite the bad behavior she might have taken part in in the past.

After Tracey nearly drowns in the pond at the old mine, police officers interrogate Meena about what has happened. Meena has the option of accusing Sam Lowbridge and Anita of pushing Tracey in the water—a version of the story that the police officers are encouraging her to validate. This would allow Meena to take revenge on Sam, who is racist, and on Anita, who has behaved in various harmful ways toward Meena and others. However, Meena decides to tell the truth, admitting that Tracey fell into the pond by accident. This act of moral honesty shows how much Meena has grown since the beginning of the novel. Instead of acting selfishly, she trusts in higher ideals such as truth and justice, understanding that lies have deep consequences on other people's lives.

The novel thus demonstrates that the value of lying or telling the truth depends partially on its effect on other people. Even though some lies might serve positive roles, lying can also harm others, which makes it reprehensible. Meena's capacity to understand these distinctions suggests that she has grown into an empathetic individual capable of standing up for greater values beyond narrow self-interest.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BIG HOUSE

Built on an old water-filled mine where four-year-old Jodie Bagshot once drowned, the Big House on Meena's street is a mysterious building with unknown residents. The secretive, potentially dangerous nature of the place makes it a symbol of the threats that lurk in Tollington itself, such as aggression and racial hostility. However, Meena's later discovery that an Indian man lives there turns the Big House into the opposite: a symbol of hidden diversity and kindness in the midst of turmoil. Meena enters the Big House's compound on two occasions: while following Anita, after which the two girls are pursued by an angry dog, and while following Tracey, who ultimately falls and almost drowns in the pond. These two episodes are marked by stress and danger, compounded by the belief Anita has instilled in Meena that the house is inhabited by an evil witch. On both occasions, though, Meena draws comfort from signs of her own culture in this hostile environment: a hidden statue of the Hindu god Ganesha in the yard and the presence of Harinder P. Singh, the Indian owner of the house. The Big House thus reveals that it is not as threatening as Meena had thought. Rather, it is capable of making Meena feel newly welcome in the community, which has become affected by racial tensions. By turning from a place of terror to a symbol of a shared foreign culture, the Big House optimistically suggests that one can always find potential allies, even in the most threatening environments.



MAMA'S NECKLACE

After Meena secretly borrows her mother's diamond necklace and then loses it, the necklace becomes a symbol of Meena's potential severance from her parents, fueled by her lies and her relationship with Anita. Meena loses the necklace while following Anita into the **Big House**, an episode that serves as a turning point in Meena's life. By following Anita, Meena proves her loyalty to the older girl, suggesting that Meena is now willing to sacrifice her own safety and well-being to remain by Anita's side. This introduces a central danger in the story: the possibility for Anita's authority to become more powerful than Meena's parents' discipline and advice. Meena's inability to tell her mother what has happened underlines her guilt, but also suggests that she would rather retain her independence than face her mother's anger. At the end of the novel, though, the owner of the Big House gives mama her necklace back, and papa tells mama to accept it without asking any questions. This happy ending proves that, despite Meena's temporary descent into rebellion and disobedience, by the end of the novel everything is back to normal, and she has returned under her parents' wings. Meena's parents' willingness to forget about some of their

daughter's potential misdeeds reveals that Meena should now focus on her future: a life of honesty and openness, far from the negative influence of people such as Anita.



THE ELEVEN-PLUS EXAM

At the end of primary school, Meena must take an exam to determine which school she will go to next: the reputable grammar school, far from Tollington, or the less esteemed comprehensive school, which Anita attends. For Meena, the eleven-plus exam represents more than a simple test. It is her opportunity to make her parents' sacrifices worthwhile and prove to them that she is capable of succeeding in the English educational system. This exam also represents an opportunity for Meena to prove *to herself* that she is capable of following her own, unique path toward success, far from the asphyxiating environment of Tollington. Meena's anticipated success on the eleven-plus thus becomes the product of the young girl's determination and intelligence, as well as her parents' love and faith in her. Meena's success on the exam marks a radical shift in her life, revealing that she is capable of succeeding if she works hard and trusts in her own capacities. This exam thus represents both a challenge and a celebration of courage and resilience.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oberon Books edition of *Anita and Me* published in 1996.

[Untitled] Quotes

●● I do not have many memories of my very early childhood, apart from the obvious ones, of course. You know, my windswept, bewildered parents in their dusty Indian village garb standing in the open doorway of a 747, blinking back tears of gratitude and heartbreak as the fog cleared to reveal the sign they had been waiting for, dreaming of, the sign planted in tarmac and emblazoned in triumphant hues of red, blue and white, the sign that said simply, WELCOME TO BRITAIN.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Mr. Kumar ("Papa"), Mrs. Kumar ("Mama")

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's opening lines show Meena telling a lie about her earliest memories. She pretends that these visual images

are her own, when in fact they are nothing but a re-creation of what other people assume to be her parents' memories. In this sense, they represent a satirical take (mostly the description of her parents' "dusty Indian village garb") on the stereotypical experiences that people expect immigrants to have upon moving to a new country.

The mix of gratitude and heartbreak that Meena mentions, however, remains close to reality. Throughout the novel, Meena understands that her parents made many sacrifices to give the family better economic opportunities in Britain. Although they hoped in a better future, they also knew that they were leaving behind loved family members whom they would miss dearly.

Meena's effort to make these memories her own reveals her desire to identify with her Indian heritage. Even though she was born and bred in England, she wants to *feel* as though she is an immigrant, because this reflects her upbringing and her family atmosphere. Meena's need to invent memories reveals that her cultural identity has not yet coalesced in her mind, and that she is still working on feeling comfortable with it.

☝ I'm not really a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Meena explains that she does not actually remember her parents' arrival in Britain, despite previously stating that these are her earliest memories. She then tries to differentiate between this act of inventing memories and actually being "a liar."

Meena argues that inventing memories does not harm anyone. For Meena, who does not know India and is therefore ignorant of the historical events that have defined her parents' lives, inventing memories actually helps her become comfortable with herself and her place in the world, as it allows her to feel connected to India. Therefore, even though she is taking part in the act of lying, she does not do it for bad reasons and cannot be considered an immoral liar.

It is only at the end of the novel that Meena will come to terms with an important realization: she does not need to invent fake memories in order to have her own cultural



identity. Rather, she must accept that she is made up of a mix of experiences, from being the daughter of Indian immigrants to growing up in the small English town of Tollington. Meena will then discover that she is *already* complete, and that her life experiences will soon enough define who—and where—she wants to be.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ 'You're so lovely. You know, I never think of you as, you know, foreign. You're just like one of us.'

My mother would smile and graciously accept this as a compliment. And yet afterwards, in front of the Aunties, she would reduce them to tears of laughter by gently poking fun at the habits of her English friends. It was only much later on that I realised in the thirteen years we lived there, during which every weekend was taken up with visiting Indian families or being invaded by them, only once had any of our neighbours been invited in further than the step of our back door.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Mrs. Kumar ("Mama")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Meena explains that most Tollington villagers love her mother, who has a warm, gentle personality. However, some people attempt to describe their affection toward mama in cultural terms, explaining that her kindness and beauty makes them forget she is foreign.


Mama's later laughter about such episodes reveals that these comments are not actually compliments, but racist statements in disguise. Not only are these villagers associating being "lovely" with being English, and thus suggesting that being foreign implies being an unpleasant person, but they are also *emphasizing* the very difference they claim to forget about: mama's foreignness. Therefore, such comments actually highlight the fact that there is a stark cultural and social separation between the English and foreigners, which fuels many immigrants' sense of exclusion from mainstream society.

Meena thus understands that her family's lack of in-depth interactions with villagers derives from the threat of racism. Meena's parents clearly do not trust Tollington villagers enough to invite them to their home, since they perceive that behind people's welcoming attitudes hides the

condescending belief that not all cultures are equal or “lovely.”

☝ I rarely rebelled openly against this communal policing, firstly because it somehow made me feel safe and wanted, and secondly, because I knew how intensely my parents valued these people they so readily renamed as family, faced with the loss of their own blood relations.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

When Meena describes her Aunties and Uncles, the Indian friends her parents treat as family, she explains that the Aunties rarely approve of Meena’s behavior. They often criticize Meena for getting her clothes dirty and behaving like a boy.



Although Meena could take such criticism personally, she understands that these comments are well-intentioned. Such judgments are an expression of the adults’ love and protection, revealing the speakers’ desire to be a part of Meena’s life and to take care of her as they think is best.

Meena’s capacity to understand certain criticism as a form of love shows her emotional maturity. It also underlines her dedication to her family, as she grasps that adults’ role is to give children structure and guidance. Meena’s capacity to challenge her Aunties’ beliefs in her mind without publicly contradicting or alienating them is a sign of strength. It shows that Meena is strong enough to love others without blindly bowing to their opinions.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ But to be told off by a white person, especially a neighbour, that was not just misbehaviour, that was letting down the whole Indian nation. It was continually drummed into me, ‘Don’t give them a chance to say we’re worse than they already think we are. You prove you are better. Always.’

Related Characters: Mrs. Kumar (“Mama”), Meena Kumar (speaker), Mr. Christmas

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

After Meena and Anita have fun running and yelling in the passageway by the Christmases’ house, Mr. Christmas comes out and gets angry at the girls, reprimanding them for making so much noise. When he threatens to tell their mothers about what they have done, Meena is suddenly scared, anticipating her mother’s reaction.

Although most parents would not want their children to trouble their neighbors, Meena has grown up with the idea that misbehaving in public is doubly wrong, not only because it is personally humiliating, but because it reflects on her entire culture, giving people the opportunity to justify their racist views. Meena thus carries an extra burden that white, English children would never consider: the need to defend one’s culture from racist stereotypes.

This situation highlights the unfairness of racism, which makes negative assumptions about people based on their appearance, not on the substance of their behavior. It suggests that Meena will always have to carry a double reputation: her reputation as an individual being and the reputation of her entire cultural group.

☝ ‘I will never understand this about the English, all this puffing up about being civilised with their cucumber sandwiches and cradle of democracy big talk, and then they turn round and kick their elders in the backside, all this It’s My Life, I Want My Space stupidity, You Can’t Tell Me What To Do cheekiness, I Have To Go To Bingo selfishness and You Kids Eat Crisps Instead Of Hot Food nonsense. What is this My Life business, anyway? We all have obligations, no one is born on their own, are they?’

Related Characters: Mrs. Kumar (“Mama”) (speaker), Mrs. Worrall

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 58-59

Explanation and Analysis

Meena relates one of her mother’s frequent complaints about the English. Using Mrs. Worrall’s case as an example, Mrs. Kumar criticizes the fact that English children often abandon their parents as soon as they are adults, following ideals of independence and individualism that might benefit them personally, but that keep families from being truly tight-knit.



Meena's mother is reacting to the opinions that she has heard English people around her express, revealing a sense of superiority over other nations considered less economically developed and less democratic. Meena's mother, by contrast, argues that the English's concept of civilization and culture is superficial, since it does not affect how people behave in their intimate lives, where they adopt what she perceives to be selfish, petty attitudes.

Meena soon realizes that her mother's cultural critiques might be true in some cases, but wrong in others. Mrs. Worrall, for example, might not have a tight-knit family, since her children live far away and never come to visit her, but she reminds Meena of her Indian acquaintances in her devotion to her husband. In this way, Mrs. Worrall shows an appreciation for family that mama would approve of. Such examples reveal that cultural generalizations are often too broad to account for every individual's behavior, and cannot be considered universally valid.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛☛ But whatever he did to make money was not what papa really was; whilst my Aunties and Uncles became strangers when listening to him, papa became himself when he sang. My tender papa, my flying papa, the papa with hope and infinite variety. And then one day I made a connection; if my singing papa was the real man, how did he feel the rest of the time?

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Mr. Kumar ("Papa")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

After discovering that her father had the opportunity to become a famous actor in India, Meena realizes that she does not know what her father actually does for a living. However, when she contrasts the joyful way her father behaves while he sings Indian songs during family gatherings and the way he talks about his job, Meena concludes that her father's job does not make him fulfilled. This highlights the sacrifice that papa—like many other immigrants—has been forced to make by choosing to live in England, where he has accepted a job that gives him economic stability but does not match his actual interests or abilities.

Meena, by contrast, has the opportunity to take control of her life and invest in her education, working hard so that she

might follow her passions and express who she is. This underlines the mixed privilege and pressure that children of immigrants might feel, as they realize that they embody the hopes and aspirations that their own parents were not allowed to carry out.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ I wanted to tell him about the old lady, but then I looked at his face and saw something I had never seen before, a million of these encounters written in the lines around his warm, hopeful eyes, lurking in the furrows of his brow, shadowing the soft curves of his mouth. I suddenly realised that what had happened to me must have happened to papa countless times, but not once had he ever shared his upset with me. He must have known it would have made me feel as I felt right now, hurt, angry, confused, and horribly powerless because this kind of hatred could not be explained.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Mr. Kumar ("Papa")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

While on a car trip with her mother, Meena hears a woman call them "bloody wogs," a vulgar, offensive term for non-whites. This represents Meena's first direct encounter with racism. She is so overwhelmed by this experience that she feels the need to share her emotions with her father.



What makes Meena feel powerless is that racism has little to do with herself—her personality and actions—but only with her skin color, something over which she has absolutely no control. The injustice of this situation leaves Meena seething, with no outlet for her anger and sorrow.

Meena's ultimate decision not to tell her father about this episode reflects her deep devotion to her family. Although she could benefit from her parents' support, she realizes that she too should try to minimize her parents' pain. When she understands that speaking about her racist experience would only make her father sad, as he would worry about her and also relive his own painful experiences, she decides to handle her emotions on her own.

This act of self-sacrifice mirrors the sacrifices that her parents make for her every day. It highlights Meena's emotional maturity, as well as her adult-like sense of responsibility.

●● Papa's singing always unleashed these emotions which were unfamiliar and instinctive at the same time, in a language I could not recognise but felt I could speak in my sleep, in my dreams, evocative of a country I had never visited but which sounded like the only home I had ever known. The songs made me realise that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Mr. Kumar ("Papa")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Although Meena feels conflicted about her mixed Indian and English identity, the moments in which she hears her father sing Punjabi songs make her feel deeply connected to India, a country she does not actually know. Instead of alienating her, these moments draw her closer to her Indian heritage, in which she finds beauty, joy, and peace.



This episode represents an opportunity for Meena to become curious about an aspect of her life that might otherwise bring her confusion: her inability to choose one single cultural identity for herself. She realizes that even though the only country she actually knows is England, she has inherited her parents' love and longing for India.

It is only once Meena meets Nanima that she will become utterly fascinated by India, and will begin to fill the gap between her desire to know the country and her actual knowledge of it. In the meantime, though, she learns to accept that a part of her identity remains mysterious, tinged with a desire to explore her roots.

Chapter 6 Quotes

●● When I said that we talked, what I mean is that Anita talked and I listened with the appropriate appreciative noises. But I never had to force my admiration, it flowed from every pore because Anita made me laugh like no one else; she gave voice to all the wicked things I had often thought but kept zipped up inside my good girl's winter coat.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Anita Rutter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

When Anita and Meena create their own "gang" of children to imitate Sam Lowbridge, Meena reflects on the nature of her relationship with Anita. She concludes that she has little say in their friendship, since Anita usually dominates the conversation so much.

Meena's description underscores that her relationship with Anita is not a true friendship based on mutual understanding and respect, but on the combination of Anita's authority and Meena's admiration. Meena, however, does not actually mind this. Her relationship with Anita represents an escape from her ordinary life, allowing her to take part in activities and conversations that are absent from her family life.

However, even though Meena claims to be attracted to gossip and cruelty, she is unable to actively wish harm upon others. Her compassion prevents her from wanting to humiliate other people—a desire that so often animates Anita. Ultimately, it is the two girls' divergent views on racism and cruelty that will destroy their relationship, proving that Meena is too conscious of other people's feelings to remain attached to someone who behaves callously.

●● I had seen how in an instant, those you called friends could suddenly become tormentors, sniffing out a weakness or a difference, turning their own fear of ostracism into a weapon with which they could beat the victim away, afraid that being an outsider, an individual even, was somehow infectious.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Kevin and Karl, Tracey Rutter, Anita Rutter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis



When Anita organizes a competition to see who can urinate the farthest, she follows the twins Karl and Kevin in humiliating her sister, who has a trace of poop on her behind. Meena does not take part in this public shaming but tries to pee as fast as she can, so that no one might find any way to make fun of her.


Meena here recognizes the relationship between fear and the desire to humiliate others. Harming others, she observes, is a way to protect oneself from harm. It can also be a gratuitous expression of violence, meant to build a community atmosphere built on the exclusion of others.

This episode forces Meena to reconsider the concept of community, as she understands that the stronger people in a group can harm the weaker ones to assert their authority. As Meena later realizes, people's racist beliefs often function in a similar way: as an expression of pure hostility and mob mentality, unrelated to the actual qualities of the person one is trying to exclude or shame.

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

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Anita Rutter

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 149-150

Explanation and Analysis

Meena soon realizes that her parents disapprove of her relationship with Anita, whom they consider vulgar and a bad influence. Meena, however, rejects her father's ideal image of a polite and docile Indian girl, which he hopes she might become. Meena finds most Indian girls boring and unadventurous. The reason she enjoys spending time with Anita is precisely because she can express a more rebellious aspect of her personality that her family does not usually value.



It is only later in the novel that Meena will realize that it is not actually attractive to be a bad person, and that being Indian does not necessarily mean being less outgoing, since Meena's own grandmother celebrates her rowdy qualities. Meena will ultimately discover that cultural identity has little to do with one's personality, and that she can choose to emphasize whichever aspect of her personality she wants without sacrificing her cultural background.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ 'They'll want cookers!' giggled mama. 'Doesn't he know we were fitting bidets into our houses when their ancestors were living in caves? Oh God!' and then she went suddenly quiet and looked hard at papa. 'God Shyam, is that how they see us? Is it really?'

Related Characters: Meena Kumar, Mrs. Kumar ("Mama")

(speaker), Mr. Kumar ("Papa"), Mr. Ormerod

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Meena recalls an episode in which her father told her mother what he overheard at Mr. Ormerod's shop. Mr. Ormerod was arguing that people in developing countries always want to abuse charity, asking for devices such as cookers and radios, whereas it would be best to bring them culture and civilization. After hearing these words, Mrs. Kumar initially laughs, but then wonders if people like Mr. Ormerod actually consider Indians uncivilized.


This moment reveals how little people like Mr. Ormerod actually know about the cultures they criticize. Such racist beliefs—claiming that English culture is superior to other ways of life—are out of touch with reality and only perpetuate simplistic visions of lower-income countries and foreigners.

Mama's mixed reaction emphasizes how ridiculous such beliefs are, but also how dangerous they can be, as they reduce other humans to inferior beings in need of foreign cultural "help." The difficulty of knowing how English people actually perceive the Kumar family explains their lack of interest in inviting people from Tollington to their home. This act of self-protection emphasizes how difficult it is for immigrants to actually integrate into a potentially racist, intolerant society.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ It was all falling into place now, why I felt this continual compulsion to fabricate, this ever-present desire to be someone else in some other place far from Tollington. Before Nanima arrived, this urge to reinvent myself, I could now see, was driven purely by shame, the shame I felt when we 'did' India at school, and would leaf through tatty textbooks where the map of the world was an expanse of pink, where erect Victorian soldiers posed in grainy photographs (...).

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Nanima

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing Nanima's dramatic stories about India, Meena

becomes fascinated with Indian history. She soon realizes that her grandmother's tales are inconsistent with the way Indian history is taught in British schools. Whereas her grandmother's stories emphasize the courage and suffering of ordinary Indians, the British narrative focuses only on the colonizers, who tried to control and subdue a foreign nation. History, Meena realizes, depends on the subjective perspective of who is relating it.

This moment proves to be a turning point in Meena's life, as she begins to embrace her Indian identity instead of shying away from it and trying to hide her cultural differences from other English girls. She discovers that her mixed identity does not have to be a source of confusion and shame, but that she can turn it into a source of pride.


●● Mr Topsy/Turvey watched her with devoted eyes. 'I served in India. Ten years. Magical country. Magical people. The best.'

'Shouldn't have bloody been there anyway, should you?' I muttered under my breath. 'Who asked you to lock up my grandad and steal his chickens?'

I was by now walking fast, making Nanima puff and trot a little to keep up, but I could still hear him shouting behind us, 'We should never have been there. Criminal it was! Ugly. You look after your nan! You hear me, Topsy!'

Related Characters: Mr. Turvey ("Mr. Topsy"), Meena Kumar (speaker), Nanima

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

When Meena walks in the street with Nanima, a man Meena calls Mr. Topsy (because he refers to her as "Topsy," claiming that he cannot pronounce her name) begins to speak in Punjabi with Nanima. This surprises everyone, and Mr. Topsy explains that he served in the British army in India.

Although Meena feels jealous about Mr. Topsy's linguistic skills, since she too wishes she could communicate with Nanima in her own language, this episode serves as a positive signal that not all members of the Tollington community are racist. Mr. Topsy's willingness to declare publicly that what the British army did in India was unacceptable, even though he took part in it, reveals that he


values ethical principles over blindly nationalistic ideas of English superiority.

This episode serves as a prelude for Meena's later discovery that an Indian man lives in the Big House, which has always been a fearful place for her. Such anecdotes suggest that even the most potentially dangerous or racist communities can contain some unexpected allies, allowing Meena to feel a sense of optimism and trust in people.

●● '... understand why, but just think if you could use all that energy to do some good. Find out who the real enemies are, the rich, the privileged, not the other people trying to make a living like you, not people like ...'

Related Characters: Uncle Alan (speaker), Nanima, Meena Kumar, Sam Lowbridge

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis



Like Mr. Topsy and the Indian owner of the Big House, Uncle Alan, the youth leader of the Methodist church, proves to be an unexpected defender of Meena and her family. When Meena walks in the street with Nanima, she overhears him talking to Sam Lowbridge, trying to convince the youth and his gang that attacking foreigners makes little sense, since they are not responsible for economic inequality in the country—supposedly the source of Sam's frustration. Rather, Sam should target the people who actually have power and abuse that power.

This speech highlights the irrationality of racism, as it targets vulnerable individuals for no logical reason. It suggests that Sam's racist beliefs are the result of frustration, but do not identify the actual source of this frustration. As such, his actions represent nothing but gratuitous violence.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ Sherrie did not even know that her parents were thinking of moving, Sherrie and Anita did not know what I suddenly realised now, that Deirdre had no intention, ever, of buying Anita a horse. Sorrow flooded me until it rose up to my eyes and made them sting. Anita, the same skinny harpy who had just narrowly missed gouging out another girl's eyes, was now whispering lover's endearments into a fat pony's ears. She needed me maybe more than I needed her. There is a fine line between love and pity and I had just stepped over it.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Sherrie, Deirdre, Anita Rutter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

At Sherrie's farm, Sherrie mentions that she looks forward to the moment when Anita and she will be able to ride their horses together. Meena, who has heard Sherrie's father announce that his family is soon going to move out of Tollington, and who also knows that Deirdre cares little about actually taking care of Anita, realizes that her friends are attached to vain illusions that will never come true.

For the first time in their relationship, Meena feels superior to Anita, instead of subservient to the girl's desires. Meena realizes that, if she benefits from a supportive family, Anita's family life lacks love and sincere caring. The fact that Anita still believes in her mother Deirdre's promise highlights the tragedy of this situation. However, instead of using her knowledge and perceptiveness against Anita, Meena resolves to use it to protect her friend.


Meena's intuition soon proves accurate, as Deirdre abandons her entire family, leaving Anita with the certainty that she will never receive a pony. However, Meena's efforts to look after Anita prove futile, as Anita remains rigidly independent, unable to make herself vulnerable and open up about her emotions.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ I decided there and then to heal myself, both in body and mind. It was time. I asked mama to bring in all my school books to prepare for the eleven-plus, I would grow my hair long and vaguely feminine, I would be nice to Pinky and Baby and seek out their company willingly, I would write letters to India and introduce myself properly to that anonymous army of blood relatives, I would learn to knit, probably, and I would always tell the truth.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker), Baby, Pinky, Mrs. Kumar ("Mama")

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

In the hospital, Meena concludes that her horseback riding accident was not an accident at all, but an intentional attempt to act wildly and hurt herself after being so cruelly disappointed by Anita's racist behavior. This episode motivates Meena to change her life entirely. She resolves to distance herself from Anita and to focus on herself instead, behaving in ways that might make her parents proud.

Some of Meena's promises—such as behaving in a way that society considers "feminine" and learning to knit—seem unlikely, because it is unreasonable for Meena to think about changing her entire personality from one day to the next. Her idea of "always always" telling the truth is also humorous, since Meena—like everyone else—is likely to utter a lie at least from time to time.

However, her decisions to work hard to prepare for her exam and to write to Pinky and Baby reveal strong moral determination. Although Meena cannot change who she is, she can control what she *does* and can try to act in a way that takes other people's feelings into account. This reveals her resolution to act courageously and to value fairness over other considerations.

In this way, even though Meena—like all other human beings—will probably never be perfect, she reveals moral maturity and confirms her desire to be a responsible human being, mindful of her community.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ I now knew I was not a bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or no place. The place in which I belonged was wherever I stood and there was nothing stopping me simply moving forward and claiming each resting place as home.

Related Characters: Meena Kumar (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 303

Explanation and Analysis

After experiencing the loss of Nanima and Robert, Meena looks at her life from a greater distance, realizing that mortality makes petty concerns about one's identity look frivolous. Therefore, Meena concludes that her concerns about not being a perfect, polite Indian girl are nonsensical. Instead, she prefers to focus on her moral conscience.

This allows Meena to conclude that she is not a bad person and that she has more control over her identity than she initially believed. Instead of abiding by strict categories, according to which an Indian girl should behave a certain way, Meena prefers to construct her identity out of her own experiences—for example, considering Tollington a home, but also wanting to discover what India has to offer, and if she might feel at home there.

Meena's new understanding of her identity as a process of construction that might change over the course of her life allows her to feel at peace with her dual background, as she is English and Indian. It gives her more agency and reveals that she is finally in control of her own destiny.

“You wanted to hurt people, you mean!” I yelled at him.
“How could you say it, in front of me? My dad? To anyone?
How can you believe that shit?”



Sam grabbed me by the wrists and I sucked in air and held it.
“When I said them,” he rasped, “I never meant you, Meena! It was all the others, not you!”

I put my face right up to his; I could smell the smoke on his breath. “You mean the others like the Bank Manager?”

Sam looked confused.

“The man from the building site. The Indian man. I know you did it. I *am* the others, Sam. You did mean me.”

Related Characters: Sam Lowbridge, Meena Kumar (speaker), Rajesh Bhatra (“The Indian Bank Manager”)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, Sam tells Meena how much she means to him, revealing that he has always considered her the best person in the village. Meena is shocked by this confession, which makes little sense in light of Sam's past racist behavior.

Meena proves unafraid of confronting Sam and speaking her mind, thus showing how courageous and morally conscientious she is. Sam's reaction seems sincere, and suggests that he truly never meant to hurt her. Although this highlights his concern for Meena's well-being, it also shows that people can behave in deeply offensive, hurtful ways without actually understanding the consequences of their actions.

Ultimately, Meena hopes that in making Sam aware of the *personal* consequences of racism, she might encourage him to abandon these ideas entirely. Although this is a laudable goal, the novel does not reveal whether or not it actually has an effect on Sam's future behavior.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

[UNTITLED]

Meena Kumar reflects on the earliest memories she can recall. She lists what she describes as her most obvious ones: the emotional moment when her parents landed in Britain after leaving their village in India, their early struggles in England, and her mother's pregnancy. After reflecting on these events, Meena then reveals that these are not actually her earliest memories. Rather, she only uses these anecdotes to impress white boys who find her exotic.

Meena's fake memories depict archetypal experiences of immigration. By using them to impress people who understand little about the complexity of her identity, Meena suggests that stereotypical assumptions about immigrants are inadequate to fully embody her experience. This introduces a central tension in Meena's life between how people perceive immigrants and how she truly is.



Meena admits that her first memory involves understanding an actor's pun on television. Her mother says that she laughed so hard that she ultimately threw up. Meena explains that she has always loved double entendre because it creates ambiguity. She notes that she is not a liar but that she believes that people without a history of their own need to compensate by creating a mythology for themselves.

Meena immediately ties lying to intelligence and amusement (understanding an actor's pun) instead of immorality and deception. She argues that, while lying might not be socially acceptable, she uses it for deeply personal reasons: to give herself an identity of her own. The idea that lying can be used for both good and bad reasons is central to the development of Anita and Me.



CHAPTER 1

As Mr. Kumar drags Meena down the street, past the posh mansions, and toward the center of Tollington and Mr. Ormerod's grocery shop, Meena screams that she is not lying. Meanwhile, she admires the countryside, noticing the industrial town of Wolverhampton in the distance, and wishes that she had not gone to Sunday school, which has taught her that what she is currently doing—lying—is sin. She wonders if she should confess and looks around her for help. From a distance, she sees her mother in a Punjabi suit, her brown skin and colorful clothing standing out among people's white laundry.

This episode reveals that Meena knows that she is doing something wrong but cannot stop herself from doing it. Despite such moments of weakness, it is this consciousness of wrongdoing that differentiates Meena from people like Anita, as she will ultimately prove committed to fighting injustice. The fact that Meena's mother's appearance sets her apart from the rest of the village serves as an early indication that Meena's family might experience problems for being conspicuously different from others.



Meena and her father pass the **Big House**, a mysterious, closed-off house that always looks deserted. The house stands on a former mine, which used to provide most of the area's employment until it closed down in the 1950s. Since then, someone has bought the mine. That person leads a mysterious life, never appearing in public but proving that they probably live there because a van sometimes come to the house to deliver groceries.

The Big House brings an element of mystery to Tollington. Its inhabitants' disinterest in forming part of the Tollington community is an early indication that, like Meena's family, they are culturally different from everyone else. Unlike what the house's appearance might suggest, this difference is neither hostile nor threatening.



Meena notes that everyone's front yards are filled with flowers and gnomes, but that her own yard makes her feel embarrassed because her mother only uses it to grow fresh herbs that she uses in her Indian cuisine. She passes by Mr. Topsy's house. She calls him Mr. Topsy because he calls her "Topsy,"—he says he cannot pronounce her name. While Mr. Kumar stops to chat with Mr. Topsy, Meena uses this opportunity to eat a piece of candy she has in her pocket.

When Mr. Kumar and Meena reach Mr. Ormerod's shop, Meena recalls speaking to Anita Rutter and her closest friends, Sherrie and Fat Sally, a few days earlier. That day, Anita told Meena that the sailor on a commercial for cigarettes on Mr. Ormerod's shop was her father Roberto, who received medals for serving in the Navy. Anita's two friends then giggled and whispered to each other. Meena, who felt embarrassed because she was wearing a dress her mother had forced her to put on, tried to communicate silently with Anita that she was more rebellious than the dress implied. She felt gratified to see Anita laugh before heading off with her two friends. Nine-year-old Meena felt impressed that Anita, who was three years older, would take the time to talk to her.

The day after Anita told Meena about the poster, Meena saw Roberto at the bus stop and asked him about his time in the Navy. Roberto did not want to talk about it, as the episode seemed to bring him pain. Suddenly, when the bus arrived, Roberto called out loudly for the ladies to come and women immediately started exiting their houses, chatting animatedly with each other. Meena explains that these women all work at a factory together, having replaced men as the main people employed in the village since the mine's closure. Now that the women have this important economic role, Meena notes that their husbands have become insignificant, staying at home while their wives leave for work. When the women pass by Meena, they say hello to her and comment on how pretty and cute she is. Meanwhile, Meena admires Roberto for being a tortured soul.

By the time Meena and her father reach Mr. Ormerod's shop, Mr. Kumar confronts his daughter again, asking her if she is finally going to tell him the truth or if he should go ask Mr. Ormerod what happened. Meena knows that this is an empty threat because Mr. Ormerod always talks so much, trying to convince people to join or donate to the Methodist church. Mr. Kumar asks her again if Mr. Ormerod truly gave her candy for free or if she took the money from her mother's bag. Meena is furious, arguing to herself that her mother should simply have given her the money in the first place. However, she fears her father's angry look.

Meena's hostility to her mother's garden does not reflect a disregard for her cooking, but a simple desire to fit in and be like everyone else, at least on the outside. Mr. Topsy's inability to pronounce Meena's name is one of various instances in the novel in which people are happier changing Meena's name instead of making an effort to pronounce it correctly, thus showing disregard for her actual identity.



Meena never realizes that Anita lied about the person on the commercial to make her family life seem more exciting than it actually is. Anita's lie aims to impress her friends Sherrie and Fat Sally and, perhaps, also to test Meena's credibility, ridiculing her in front of older girls. This first interaction with Anita thus sets the tone for Anita and Meena's future relationship, which will remain marked by Anita's efforts to dominate and humiliate others. Part of the reason why Meena goes along with this is because she is flattered to spend time with older girls, without realizing that Anita will never allow it to become an equal friendship.



Although Meena interprets Roberto's silence as pain, it remains ambiguous what Roberto actually thinks of his experience in the war. The women's friendly attitude toward Meena suggests that the young girl is well-liked in the village. This makes the presence of racism and resentment in Tollington all the more surprising, since no one seems to harbor actual hostility toward the Kumars. The mention of past economic downturns explains the impression of stagnation that emanates from Tollington, fuelling the social and economic frustration that people like Sam Lowbridge experience.



Although Meena perceives her father as restricting her freedom, her family plays an important role in building in her a sense of accountability and an understanding of morality. In the heat of the moment, Meena is more focused on avoiding humiliation than in admitting her misdeeds. This will prove a common pattern, as Meena usually understands the consequences of her actions only after the fact, when she has time to reflect.



Meena recalls getting into trouble once, after a boy at school said that this region was called the Black Country because so many “darkies” lived there. Meena had said nothing at the time but had later kicked the boy in the face, leaving him with a bloody nose. The teacher had beat Meena on the legs as punishment, while Meena defiantly argued that her family was the only Indian family in Tollington and that the country looked green to her.

Meena knows that she should tell the truth to her father before they walk into Mr. Ormerod’s shop and thus make her embarrassment public. She hears a door slam shut and concludes that people must be watching her exchange, since Tollington residents always watch others, having so little to do. When Mr. Kumar pushes open the shop door, Meena finally admits that she was lying. She sees the disappointment on her father’s face. He lets go of her hand and walks toward their house without saying a word.

CHAPTER 2

On the steps outside her house, Meena sits and eats her candy, concluding that feeling sick will be adequate punishment for stealing her mother’s money. Meena then recalls an episode in which she almost choked to death. That day, on her birthday, instead of having a party at home, her parents chose to go to the movie theater, because Meena’s mother was feeling depressed, seemingly due to problems related to money and her own mother Nanima. Meena preferred going to the theater because she felt as though she had no one to invite to a party except smaller children. After the movie, though, she felt disturbed to notice that her mother was still not feeling well and had tears in her eyes.

On the way back, Meena was eating a hot dog in the car when she felt the sausage get stuck in her throat, and her parents were talking too animatedly in the front to notice what was happening. Instead of being terrified, Meena felt excited by this sudden life-or-death adventure. However, when her sausage finally fell out of her mouth, her mother saw it on her dress and got mad at her for ruining it. Meena did not justify herself, instead planning to use this episode against her mother in the future.

Unlike the scene with her father in which Meena is trying to hide a bad action, Meena is capable of defying authority for good reasons, such as punishing someone for making a racist comment. Although Meena’s violence is not necessarily justified, the teacher’s reaction is equally cruel, as she punishes the young girl without trying to understand to her motives.



In this situation, Meena only admits the truth once she is faced with the threat of personal embarrassment. Therefore, she does not act out of moral necessity but out of a desire to protect herself. Moments such as these reveal how difficult it is to behave in a perfectly righteous way, as admitting one’s mistakes often comes with a cost. This emphasizes the fact that behaving morally involves effort and self-sacrifice, which Meena will have to learn.



Throughout the novel, Meena’s parents show moments of sadness or depression due to being so far away from their own parents. This highlights the importance of family in Meena’s life, as she understands that worrying about others is an important aspect of love. It also underlines the emotional difficulty of being an immigrant on another continent. Meena’s insecurity about not having enough friends partly explains her desire to become friends with Anita and thus fill a social gap in her life.



Meena’s excitement at having a near-death experience reveals how different she feels from the typical image of an obedient girl she is supposed to. Meena longs to find herself in exciting, potentially dangerous situations, at odds with her parents’ concerns—such as not getting her clothes dirty. This establishes her as an inherently rebellious, imaginative soul.



Meena describes her mother as someone who does not raise her voice often but who is terrifying when she is angry. She explains that her mother always gets angry when Meena tells lies, regardless of how big a lie it might be. Meena does not necessarily mind her mother's outbursts of anger because they make her feel connected to her. To most people, though, Mrs. Kumar appears as a kind, graceful lady whom everyone admires. Meena recalls local villagers' comments that her mother is "so lovely" that they do not think of her as "foreign." Meena explains that her mother would smile at such words but later mock these people in front of her Indian friends. Meena only realized later in her life that her family never once invited English people to their home, even though their Indian acquaintances came to their house every weekend.

Meena calls the group of Indian friends who regularly come to her house "Aunties" and "Uncles," respectful terms for older Asian people. Although they all have their own personality, this group functions as enforcers of good manners and discipline, often supporting mama's criticism. Meena does not usually agree with their comments—criticism of how dirty Meena looks after spending hours outside or of the fact that she behaves like a boy—but they make her feel loved and safe. She also knows that her parents enjoy spending time with these people they call their family, because they can all share anecdotes from India together.

Meena also describes learning about her parents' love story through the Aunties. She discovered that her parents' courtship was glamorous and exciting, even if her mother does not like to admit this openly. Meena wonders why there is only one picture of her parents' wedding, and why her mother looks so happy on that occasion, whereas many Indian brides, whose marriages are arranged, look forlorn.

Reflecting on her Aunties, Meena describes once complaining to them about the fact that her family does not have a typically English, well-decorated garden. This comment led to the Indian women's long rant about the English's customs. The women complained that the English treat their dogs better than their children, want their children to leave at sixteen, and barely wash. As they gossiped, Meena noticed that beneath the women's laughter lay a desire for revenge.

As Meena eats her candy in front of her house, she hears her parents take part in a heated argument and wonders if they are fighting about their house, which her father is tired of, in part because it has an outdoor toilet and he has to take three buses to get to work. Her mother, by contrast, has never cared about the state of the house, focusing instead on the natural space of the countryside, which reminds her of home.

Meena's enjoyment of her mother's anger associates love with intensity and drama, emphasizing how much Meena appreciates exciting events, even if they are negative—and thus establishing the basis for Meena's relationship with Anita. Despite their affectionate tone, the local villagers' efforts at praising mama can be seen as a form of racism, since they consider not being foreign to be a compliment—thus suggesting that being foreign is bad. This inability for some people to understand cultural differences as a form of beauty and an opportunity to learn from each other makes Meena's mother feel excluded and patronized, thus fueling her own exclusion of the English.



The solidarity that exists among Meena's extended "family" contrasts with the tensions among certain Tollington residents. This family atmosphere allows Meena and her parents to feel safe and accepted, whatever problems might exist in the outside community. Meena's understanding of the adults' criticism as love reveals her maturity, as she understands that the adults mean well—even if she does not actually want to follow their recommendations. Meena's capacity to disobey reveals her tendency toward rebellion, but also her capacity to think critically and independently.



The fact that Meena's parents probably acted in defiance of their own parents' desires or of society's norms serves as potential validation of Meena's behavior, highlighting that disobeying authority does not necessarily equate wrongdoing.



Through her own family's behavior, Meena begins to understand that intolerance and hostility often derive from a feeling of pain—in this case, the discrimination and condescension that these Indian relatives are so used to experiencing in British society. Pain, however, does not necessarily lead to empathy. In this case, it leads to stereotypical generalizations about the English.



If Meena often wonders about the boundaries of her cultural identity, it appears that her parents do as well, as her mother shows a strong attachment to her Indian home, which she is currently severed from. This suggests that her parents might feel just as estranged as Meena does.



Meena describes her alternate fascination and boredom with her mother's stories about home in India, though she does cherish a particular anecdote about her mother seeing someone get stabbed. According to her mother's story, a man in a rickshaw asked the driver for a cigarette, also indicating that he needed a light. The driver then stabbed him with a knife he was hiding in his garment, for no apparent reason. Meena finds this story fascinating because of how such violence can emerge in ordinary, trivial circumstances. She compares this episode to the moment she almost died while eating the hot dog.

Meena's attitude toward India is initially marked by the fact that she has never been there and therefore does not feel particularly attached to what happens there, unlike her parents. Although Meena's fascination for violence seems potentially sadistic, Meena proves strongly non-violent in real life and hates seeing other people harmed or humiliated. This suggests that Meena is able to separate her imaginative curiosity for morbid topics from the reality of violence and injustice.



CHAPTER 3

While Meena is sitting on the steps in front of her house, Anita Rutter walks by. She shows Meena leaves where butterflies lay their eggs and throws a naked branch at Meena's legs. Although the branch stings, Meena understands this as a test and does not try to protect herself. Anita then asks Meena what candy she has and, when Meena shows her, Anita grabs the bag and begins walking, asking Meena if she plans on following her. Meena remembers that this is the first day of her six-week summer holiday and decides to follow her.

Anita has previously tried to test Meena's credulity by telling her about her father on Mr. Ormerod's poster, and she now tries to test Meena's physical resistance and loyalty. This foreshadows Anita's frequent use of abuse and violence in her relationships. It also serves as an indication that Anita herself might suffer from abuse, and therefore does not find it unusual to use it on other people.



Meena follows Anita from a certain distance, knowing that it is an honor merely to be in the older girl's presence. Anita always rules over everyone and has a group of smaller kids who follow her around everywhere, though her most regular friends are Fat Sally, a shy girl from an upper-class background, and Sherrie, the farmer's daughter. When Anita and Meena reach one of the alleyways (called "entries") leading to a communal dirt yard behind the cottages, Anita turns into the one closest to the Christmases' house.

Following Anita from a distance will become a pattern throughout the novel, symbolic in its implications. It suggests that Anita only accepts relationships in which she is able to lead and control others. In this way, it also reveals Anita's rejection of true vulnerability: she will never be able to let others bridge the emotional distance she establishes between the world and herself. This protects her from potential harm, but also prevents her from benefiting from true connection.



Meena explains that Mrs. Christmas has cancer and is likely to die. Meena then realizes that she has not seen Mrs. Christmas in a long time, since back when Meena was in charge of knocking on people's doors to ask if they would donate anything to the Spring Fayre, which could then be sold. At the time, Meena knew that people were disappointed to see her knock on their door instead of Uncle Alan, a youth leader from the Methodist church whom everyone finds incredibly charming. However, that day, when Mrs. Christmas saw Meena, she gave the girl a large pile of clothes, saying that she wouldn't need them where she was going. Meena noticed how delicate the fabrics were, and the colors were more delicate than her mother's vividly colored clothing. Mrs. Christmas was kind with Meena, offering her a piece of candy and waving at her as she walked away.

Mrs. Christmas's warm attitude toward Meena makes the young girl feel truly appreciated and welcomed in the community. Mrs. Christmas's willingness to get rid of most of her clothes shows that she knows she is soon going to die and that she no longer needs material possessions.



Meena is about to ask Anita if she has seen Mrs. Christmas recently when Anita suddenly runs down the entry, yelling as fast as she can, generating echoes all along the walls. Anita then tells Meena to do the same. Meena does, finding this activity liberating, as though she has always wanted to evacuate such screams. However, at that very moment, Mr. Christmas emerges from his house, furious.

Mr. Christmas yells at the girls, telling them that his wife Mrs. Christmas is sick and needs peace and quiet. He threatens to tell the girls' mothers about what has happened. Meena, who feels as though she has already gotten in enough trouble for one day, begs him not to. In addition, she knows that being told off by a white neighbor is, to her mother, an insult to India in general. Mama always says that the family needs to behave impeccably, so that people might not be given the chance to think of them in even worse ways than they already do.

Meena tries to get Anita to apologize as well, but Anita merely says that she doesn't care if Mr. Christmas tells her mother, Deirdre, about this. Meena considers such behavior treason and is shocked to then hear Anita call Mr. Christmas a "soft old sod." Disgusted, Mr. Christmas makes an ironic comment about how nice Meena's new friends are, before slamming the gate and turning up the TV.

A few minutes later, when Meena and Anita reach Anita's house, Meena sees Tracey, Anita's sister, a pale, weak-looking child, the complete opposite of her sister. Tracey says that their mother Deirdre is not home yet. Hairy Neddy, their neighbor—a man who used to be covered in facial hair—tells them that Deirdre must have gone shopping.

Hairy Neddy is the only bachelor in the village and Meena recounts an anecdote when his musical band tried to drive away with their various instruments but could not find a way to fit them all in the car. Neighbor and divorcee Sandy then gave Hairy Neddy one of her stockings, explaining that they were extra-long and might help. This confused Hairy Neddy, although the stockings did succeed in tying together the instruments, keeping them from falling out of the car. From that moment on, Sandy tried to seduce Hairy Neddy, her neighbor, though she gave up when Hairy Neddy failed to reciprocate.

Meena's concern with Mrs. Christmas's well-being contrasts starkly with Anita's utter disregard for others, as she focuses exclusively on her own selfish whims, oblivious to the rest of the community. At the same time, Meena appreciates the freedom she feels with Anita. These mixed positive and negative elements will remain central to Meena's relationship with Anita.



Although Meena has not yet experienced direct racism personally, she already knows that people might see her in a different way than she sees herself. This awareness of her difference from white people reinforces her feeling of exclusion from certain aspects of English culture. It highlights the social and emotional burden that immigrant communities bear, as they are forced to deal with people's pre-existing racist stereotypes and hostility.



Anita's lack of solidarity with Meena serves as an early indication that she will always be more interested in following her own desires than in listening to her friend. Her defiance of traditional behavior toward adults also reveals the gap in the two girls' upbringings, as Meena is used to respecting her parents.



Deirdre's absence reinforces the idea that Anita probably benefits from little adult guidance and discipline. It also introduces the theme of neglect, as the two girls learn to be self-sufficient—which they will later have to do permanently, when Deirdre abandons her family.



The fact that Meena knows so much about the relationship between Sandy and Hairy Neddy reveals the extent to which gossip in the village allows everyone to know the personal details of their neighbors' lives. Although this particular anecdote is not necessarily harmful, people's judgments of their neighbors' private lives contributes to the tensions in Tollington, which creates rival social groups. Cultural differences are not the only potential factor for exclusion in the community.



Meena describes the village's atmosphere, noting that adults sometimes get into vicious fights. She explains that showing pain only demonstrates vulnerability, thus inviting greater violence. In contrast with her mother's sentimental attitude, which is bound to pity others, Meena knows that she sometimes needs to use violence against other children to keep from being bullied. Meena realizes, though, that Tracey is infinitely more scared and vulnerable than she is.

Deirdre soon arrives, wearing high heels and a very tight sweater. Meena notices that it looks as though Deirdre has been running, because she is sweaty and her mascara has run a little bit. When Anita asks her mother what she was doing, Deirdre says she was shopping, although she has no bags with her. Deirdre then says that she was only window shopping and asks the girls if they want fish fingers for dinner. Both Anita and Meena are excited, because Meena knows that it is customary to invite the children's friends for dinner, and she enjoys these opportunities for socializing like grown-ups do. However, after Deirdre opens the door and looks at Meena confusedly, Anita simply tells Meena "See you tomorrow" and closes the gate.

Meena is thus forced to walk home, wondering if she behaved in the wrong way. On her way home, she passes by Sam Lowbridge's house. Sixteen-year-old Sam is considered Tollington's rebel, as he already has a criminal record and scares the little children. However, he has always been polite and kind to Meena. His mother, Glenys, is the town's oldest single parent. When Meena passes in front of their house, Glenys, who looks much older than her age because she smokes so much, asks her if she has seen Sam, but Meena says she hasn't. Glenys says she needs to play bingo and asks Meena to tell her if she sees Sam later.

When Meena reaches her house, she sees her mother at the Bike Shed, a small shed in their backyard (next to the outdoor toilet) that they use as storage, though they have no bikes. Mama yells to Mrs. Worrall, their kindly neighbor who shows much interest in Meena, that she has found what she was looking for. Meena has wondered in the past if Mrs. Worrall is childless, but her mother explained that Mrs. Worrall has children who live very far away. Mama then added that she did not understand English family relationships, in which children strive for independence and soon abandon their parents. Meena enjoys these speeches, because they make her feel as though her future and her family life are more special and loving than everyone else's.

Meena's understanding of relationships among children as potentially tinged with violence serves as an introduction to the violent events she will later witness. Tracey's shyness and vulnerability also foreshadows Meena's later discovery that the young girl is probably being sexually abused. Tollington is not as peaceful as it might appear.



In light of what later happens in the novel, it is easy to interpret Deirdre's explanation that she went shopping as a lie, meant to hide her affair with another man—as her runny mascara and seductive clothing seem to confirm. Anita's family's failure to invite Meena over underlines that they do not follow traditional social norms—and are, in that sense, separate from the rest of the community. This also explains Anita's frequently rude behavior and lack of generosity, as she has not grown up in a family that upholds such values.



In the same way that elements of Anita's behavior make sense in light of her family dynamics, Sam's behavior also appears connected to his family life. Glenys's smoking and comment about bingo suggests that she might be addicted to harmful habits. Her ignorance of her son's whereabouts also indicates that she has little control over Sam's actions. These details highlight a negative side of youthful rebellion, fueled by frustration and the absence of a rich family life. This contrasts with Meena's more innocuous desire to be outside and take part in exciting activities.



Meena's mother's comments about English families seemingly confirm the lack of closeness that Meena has noticed in Anita and Sam's families. However, this comment remains a generalization, based on cultural differences and the dynamics Meena's family sees in Tollington. The fact that Meena lives in a house with an outdoor toilet and no bikes suggests that her parents are probably from a humble economic background. This highlights the fact that family happiness has little to do with one's socio-economic situation.



Mama walks to Mrs. Worrall, giving her an old vase. Meena says that she is hungry but refuses the Indian food her mother offers her, asking for fish fingers instead. Mama then focuses on her daughter, gently asking her why she stole money and lied to her father, but Meena stubbornly answers that she didn't lie, even though she knows that her parents have already discussed what happened. Although Meena feels confused by her own obstinate behavior, she concludes that she has had the best day of her life, as she has spent time with her new friend Anita.

After mama walks back into the house, Mrs. Worrall asks Meena if she would like to help her out with cooking. Meena has seen Mrs. Worrall's kitchen countless times but has never entered her house. Meena knows that her mother must be surrounded by boiling vegetables and the fresh smell of spices at the moment, preparing a meal that her father desperately needs after his day at the office, which he never talks about. Usually, as soon as Meena's mother leaves school, where she teaches, she goes into the kitchen to spend time cooking rich Indian meals. Mama has tried to teach Meena how to cook, but Meena always proves disinterested.

Mrs. Worrall tells Meena that she is making jam tarts, which her husband, Mr. Worrall, loves. Meena accepts to join her. She has never made pastry but soon finds the process fun, as she sees the dough turn into small tartlets. Meena hears moaning from the other side of the kitchen door, and Mrs. Worrall tells her to go say hello to her husband. Meena sees Mr. Worrall sitting in a chair in a living room that smells unaired, in addition to the faint smells of medicine and pee. Mr. Worrall is visibly very sick and unable to communicate, looking straight ahead with surprised eyes and moaning incoherently.

As Meena gets ready to leave, she realizes that Mrs. Worrall is courageous to take care of such a sick husband. She concludes that, unlike what her mother says, not all the English are selfish. Rather, the Tollington women often demonstrate a sense of endurance and resignation that reminds Meena of some of the Aunties' attitudes toward their children or their jobs. On her way out, after taking a lemon curd pie, Meena hesitates and yells goodbye to Mr. Worrall. Mrs. Worrall then leads her out the door.

Meena's desire to eat fish fingers derives from having seen Anita—whose behavior she admires—eat fish fingers with her family. It also highlights Meena's frustration with knowing that she is a foreigner and her desire to fit into traditional English society. Meena's awareness that her obstinate lying is ridiculous suggests that she does not necessarily want to behave in a bad way, but that she sometimes cannot control her instinctual reactions.



The contrast between Mrs. Worrall's mysterious kitchen and Meena's mother surrounded by spices highlights the cultural differences between the two families. Despite growing up in Britain, Meena—like her parents—considers rich, spicy food typical of home, while British food, however bland, is exotic and mysterious. Meena's attitude toward food mirrors her ambiguous feelings about her identity.



Meena's help in the making of jam tartlets serves as an image of her participation in typical British life. Mrs. Worrall's attitude demonstrates that she wants Meena to feel welcome and cherished. The distressing appearance of Mrs. Worrall's husband reveals how little people actually know about each other's private lives, despite the omnipresence of village gossip. The actual details of people's struggles remain out of public view.



Meena realizes that stereotypical assumptions about people are just as wrong when they target foreigners as when they target locals. Thanks to her sharp critical judgment, Meena is able to grasp the similarities that exist between people's behaviors, despite their cultural differences. She concludes that people should be judged by their actions, not by their identity or appearance.



CHAPTER 4

When Meena enters her home, she sees her parents sitting on a fake leather chair, which they all find funny because it makes leathery farting sounds. Her mother stands up to go to the kitchen and her father tells her to sit down. He asks Meena to tell them in the future if she wants something. He then tells her a story that he calls the boy and the tiger, but that Meena recognizes as *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*.

After the story, Meena apologizes for lying and asks her father if he, too, fought in the war and did dangerous things. Papa tries to explain that Indians were involved in another battle and mentions that he did do something dangerous right before Partition, the historical moment when the English divided up India into India and Pakistan, leaving scores of people to flee their homes. Meena learned about this event during one of her father's *mehfils*, or evenings of poetry and music, for which her father, an excellent singer, is legendary.

Meena describes the magical atmosphere that her father creates during such evenings. She recalls being woken up once by a fierce discussion between guests one evening, as people discussed the horrors of Partition, with its massacres and forced evacuations. Meena was horrified to hear some of these stories and heard many guests weeping. Her father then took part in the conversation, describing being in a carriage where Hindus entered and cut off a Muslim man's head. He also described spending time in a refugee camp. That night, after these stories, Meena had terrible nightmares.

Now, Meena is excited to hear what her father might have to say about Partition. Papa then describes being paid to deliver a package to a house, only to realize, after dropping it off, that it was a bomb, meant to kill a Muslim merchant. Meena asks him if there was anyone in the house. Her father begins to say that he doesn't know but catches himself, insisting that there was no one there. Papa then tells Meena that she should eat, revealing that her mother has made her something special. At that moment, mama comes in, bearing a plate of fish fingers and French fries.

Meena's parents demonstrate solidarity in trying to help Meena make the right decisions and become an honest person. Their relationship emphasizes the respect and equality with which they arrive at decisions together, thus building a cohesive family unit.



Meena's apology reveals that, although she is stubborn, she is capable of admitting when she does something wrong—an important quality that represents the first step in making moral decisions. Papa's response highlights the opposition between English history and Indian history, as the English focus on fighting the Axis powers in the Second World War, whereas Indians were focused on what would happen to their own country under British colonial rule.



The division of British colonial India into separate, ethnic-based entities led to people's forced migration from one territory to another. The events of that time led scores of people to be killed because of their ethnic and religious identity. Meena's father highlights the horrific consequences of decisions made by colonial powers, suggesting that Britain is heavily responsible for India's current political, economic, and social situation, which is sometimes dire enough to lead people to immigrate to England.



Meena discovers that her father involuntarily took part in actions motivated by religious and ethnic hatred. This reveals how powerful racism can be, as it turns into violence—mirroring, on a larger scale, the gratuitous violence Sam Lowbridge later takes part in. Meena's mother's decision to make fish fingers reveals her effort to make her daughter feel connected to England, instead of forcing her to focus only on her Indian identity.



That night, Meena is woken up by the sound of an ambulance siren. She looks outside and sees a gathering by the Christmases' house, where two men are carrying Mrs. Christmas's body out of her house. Mama enters Meena's room, asking her what she is doing. Both of them hear then Deirdre's loud voice explain that she went to talk to Mr. Christmas, who had said something to Anita, when she saw Mrs. Christmas in front of the television, the state of her face suggesting that she had been dead for weeks. Mr. Ormerod comments that Mr. Christmas was probably too confused to know what he was doing.

Overwhelmed by the sight of a dead body and the idea that, if Anita hadn't disturbed Mr. Christmas, no one might have known about Mrs. Christmas's death, Meena feels sick and has to lie down. She worries that Anita's and her screaming might have killed Mrs. Christmas. After her mother puts her to bed, she gets up one last time and sees Anita in the street. The girl looks up and winks at her (or so Meena is convinced).

Mr. Christmas dies three weeks later in his sleep. While mama gets ready to go to the funeral, Meena notices that her father is in one of his bad moods. She argues that he should cry from time to time, to release his sadness. Meena hears her parents talk while she watches the television and understands that they are talking about her grandparents. Her mother tells her father not to worry about them, but her father gloomily replies that they will die in the absence of their children, far away from them.

Meena then describes what she knows about her grandparents, noting that her paternal grandfather Dadaji was a staunch communist who kept his son from having an acting career because he believed people should be involved in politics, not entertainment. This anecdote has led Meena to feel sad about not having a famous actor as a father. Mostly, though, she knows that her father's job does not fit with his personality, and that he must feel sad not to be able to express who he truly is.

The morbid details about Mrs. Christmas's death and decomposed state make the Tollington community seem less safe and peaceful than it might appear. It introduces an atmosphere of unease, suggesting that people's private lives might be stranger or more horrifying than they suggest—serving as a prelude to other events, such as Meena's later discovery that Tracey is probably sexually abused in her home.



Meena doesn't realize that her yelling earlier in the day has nothing to do with Mrs. Christmas's death. Her worrying reveals her concern for other people, though, as she never meant to harm anyone through her actions—unlike Anita, who seems to enjoy such death and drama.



Meena realizes that her parents care very much about their family: both their daughter and their own parents. She understands the emotional toll that being away from their parents must have on her father, as he feels responsible for leaving his parents alone in their old age. These visions of family influence Meena greatly.



Meena's capacity for compassion shows itself in her attitude toward her father. Although she initially acts self-centered in caring only about having a famous father, she later demonstrates a capacity to empathize with her father's difficult circumstances. This underlines Meena's perceptiveness and her understanding of the sacrifices that her parents have made in coming to England.



After Meena's parents talk about their own parents, she sees them holding hands and realizes that her parents are much more affectionate toward each other than any other adult couple she knows. She recalls seeing Sam Lowbridge and his group of friends hold hands with girls in the same way that her parents do, though they seem to change girls every week. She also notes that she never sees their English neighbors behave affectionately. Rather, she describes the loud noises at the local nightclub, where many women get drunk and then loudly discuss their marriages in the street. Although Meena admires her parents' close relationship, she feels fascinated by the English people's bold, provocative behavior, free of deep emotions.

As Meena reflects on these issues, realizing that her father always gets depressed whenever he hears news about death, her father suddenly announces that her mother is pregnant and that Meena will soon have a baby brother or sister. He asks her if she is happy about this, but Meena keeps her eyes locked on the TV and utters a clear-cut "no."

Meena feels proud of her parents' attitude when she compares it to that of most other couples. This reveals her faith in the validity of her family's values and behaviors. Meena's simultaneous interest in the English way of life suggests that she finds their attitudes exotic and foreign. This fascination does not translate into a desire to emulate them, however, as Anita so often strives to do by trying to seduce young English men like Sam Lowbridge.



Meena's unhappiness at hearing that she will no longer be the only child in her family suggests that she enjoys receiving so much love and care from her parents. This reaction of jealousy will ultimately subside as she becomes affectionately attached to her little brother.



CHAPTER 5

The next time Meena runs into Anita Rutter is in late October, by which time her mother's tummy has already grown visibly. Meena has seen Anita around. She has noticed that Anita always locks arms with one friend at the time, leaving the other to walk behind, thus creating a rivalry between friends. Meena has also seen Tracey with their new dog, whom she discovers Deirdre has called "Nigger." When Meena first told her parents about this, they both laughed wholeheartedly, criticizing the English's ignorance and their lack of concern for using such words in front of children.

From that moment on, Meena's mother decides to treat Deirdre coldly, showing her only a polite façade, at odds with the warm conversations she has with other neighbors. Meena knows that this also makes her friendship with Anita more problematic. One day, though, Anita knocks of Meena's door to see if Meena wants to see workers unload trucks.

That day, Meena's mother has been cooking for weeks to prepare for Diwali, what she refers to neighbors as their version of Christmas, unwilling to explain the details concerning the Hindu Festival of Light. Meena is shocked by the village's indifference to Diwali and understands why her mother makes it a point to celebrate Christmas, so that Meena might not feel left out.

By observing Anita's behavior from the outside, Meena has few illusions about Anita's obsession with having power over other people. However, this does not keep Meena from wanting to be Anita's friend—she, too, wants to enjoy Anita's influence. Her parents' laughter at the dog's vulgar, racist name reveals that they consider Deirdre—and the rest of Tollington—ignorant but innocuous. This will later change when some people become more openly racist.



Meena's mother's decision to change her relationship with Deirdre is a form of punishment and self-protection, revealing that she will not tolerate people's racist views, even if she does not feel the need to confront Deirdre directly.



The holidays reveal to Meena how unusual her cultural upbringing is in this small English village. She wishes to be part of the norm and share her celebrations with everyone, instead of having to enjoy them only within the narrow circle of her own family. Her frustration highlights the isolation that being part of a cultural minority can entail.



Meena's mother tells her that all religions coexist peacefully in India, and that religions all lead to the same god. Meena's father never had a religious upbringing because of Dadaji's communist beliefs, and is frustrated by what people do in the name of religion, arguing that he always acts in the name of humanity. Meena, though, wishes her family had an elegant shrine, like her Auntie Shaila's. Auntie Shaila, the most boisterous of all the Aunties, once told Meena that people's bad behavior affects them in their next life, and Meena, who knows that she lies a lot, came home crying. Her father simply told her that she should listen to a little voice in her head, her conscience, and she will always find her way to God.

The day after this, Meena's mother took her to the *gurudwara* in Birmingham, the Sikhs' place of worship. This was surprising both because mama is not very religious, and because she is a terribly slow driver and this would be her first time driving alone. Although the journey initially went according to plan, they reached a difficult crossroads on a very steep slope. After they missed the green light and were forced to brake, mama soon yelled at Meena to go tell the bus driver behind them to move back, because their car was moving backwards.

Meena exited the car and apologetically asked drivers to go back. She had expected aggressiveness, but noticed that people behaved courteously, with an expression that signaled that they expected this kind of behavior from people like Meena, as though this were an act of charity on their part. However, the woman in the last car nonchalantly began insulting Meena, calling her a "bloody stupid wog"—an offensive term for non-whites. Meena feels as though she has been punched and runs back to her car.

Meena was so shocked by the woman's words that she could not concentrate on the prayers and rituals and does not remember much about that day. Back home, when her father asked her about her day, she almost told him but then realized that her father must have had these kinds of experiences countless times and knows the same feelings of anger, confusion, and powerlessness that she was experiencing. She decided that, in the same way her father did not share these painful moments with her, she would not make him preoccupied, and so does not tell him what happened.

Meena's understanding of religion and tolerance derives from her parents' open-minded attitude. Instead of focusing on religious doctrine, they instill in Meena respect for cultural differences and an emphasis on behaving well in the name of the human community—that is, reflecting on how one's actions affect others. This emphasizes that people should learn to live peacefully together instead of focusing on their differences. It also suggests that everyone is capable of knowing what is morally right and wrong, regardless of their religion.



Meena's mother takes her daughter to a place of worship because she understands that Meena is interested in issues of morality, or at least in understanding the consequences of her misdeeds. The fact that the gurudwara is so far away contrasts with the presence of the church in Tollington itself, underlining the difficulties that immigrants who want to remain connected to their culture and institutions face.



However gentle people's reactions to Meena's demands might be, their charitable attitude is a form of racism. These drivers seem to expect foreign immigrants to be inferior, perhaps less intelligent or capable than English natives. The woman's direct insults might be harsher and more distressing, but they build on this atmosphere of underlying superiority, turning it into blunt hostility.



This represents Meena's first personal experience with direct racism. It makes her feel powerless and confused, because the woman's insults have little to do with who Meena actually is, only with how she appears externally—something that does not affect her actual personality and over which she has little control. Meena's desire to protect her father reveals her love and commitment to her family, as well as her emotional maturity.



On Diwali, Meena's parents organize a *mehfil* with the Aunties, Uncles, and their children. Meena, who wishes she received presents on this occasion like she does at Christmas, decides that she will treat herself by going to the fair with Anita. Her mother tells her to be back by five o'clock. On the way there, Anita tells Meena that she is going to receive a pony for Christmas and that she will later live in a shared apartment with Sherrie in London, which makes Meena feel jealous.

When Meena and Anita pass by the **Big House**, Anita crosses herself, saying that a witch lives there. She mentions Jodie Bagshot, a four-year-old girl who went missing a few years ago and was found to have drowned in the water-filled old mine. Anita tries to scare Meena by telling her that the witch can see into Meena's bedroom.

When the two girls reach the fair, Meena reflects on the fascinating, romantic life that the fair people must lead, as they move constantly from one place to the next. They run into Sherrie and Fat Sally, who have a lot of make-up on their faces and are wearing very short clothes. When the group notices three boys nearby who have stopped work to look at them, Anita walks toward them and begins to chat, after saying that the tall one is hers. Meena is fascinated to see Anita make the boys—who in other occasions Meena would have done her best to avoid—laugh.

By the time Anita invites the other girls over, Dave "The Poet" has put his arm around her. Sherrie chooses to stand by a boy called Tonio, which leaves Fat Sally and the last boy, Gary, to stay together. Meena sees the boy's disappointment about being stuck with Fat Sally change into relief when he notices Meena, as though Meena were so unattractive that Fat Sally, by contrast, looked beautiful.

When Dave says something in Anita's ear, Anita pulls the girls aside and begins to whisper to them, finally admitting that he said he wanted "to shag the arse off me." Meena, who until then has felt completely invisible, concludes that this must be a compliment. Noticing Meena's puzzled face, Anita says that this means he really loves her. The girls then return to the boys and Meena realizes that Anita has never introduced her, which means that the boys don't even know her name.

Anita's bragging and boasting serve, as many of her actions do, to pit her friends against each other and feel as though they need to compete for her attention. In this case, they also reveal one of Anita's weaknesses: her childlike belief in certain promises, such as the fact that her mother has enough money—and cares enough about her desires—to buy her a pony.



Anita's efforts to scare Meena are playful, but also highlight her need to have power over others and make them feel weak and vulnerable. The Big House thus becomes a terrifying place for Meena, at odds with her later discovery that it is inhabited by people just like her.



Meena's interest in these nomadic workers reflects her imagination and curiosity, as well as an early, open-minded interest in the possibility of leaving Tollington and discovering the rest of the world. Anita's capacity to make the boys laugh reveals her charisma and social intelligence, which leads most people to remain fascinated by her, even if she is often less interested in the people themselves than in her own entertainment.



The fact that Gary judges the girls on their appearance reveals the superficial nature of these relationships. His relief at not being stuck with Meena adds racism to this superficiality, suggesting that, in his eyes, having brown skin equals ugliness. These kinds of experiences make Meena lose confidence in herself.



Anita's appreciation of vulgar sexual expressions clashes with Meena's education and family values, which have sheltered her from anything related to sex. The fact that Anita has not introduced Meena proves not only that Anita is probably not a true friend, but that she too might see foreign Meena as an inferior acquaintance, someone not even worth mentioning.



When Meena arrives home, she pretends that she is fine. She looks at herself in the mirror while wearing a traditional Indian outfit and puts on some of her mother's make-up. She also grabs her mother's gold **necklace**, with a diamond in the center, but hides it underneath her vest, even though she assumes her mother would not be bothered to know she borrowed it. When Meena opens the door, Auntie Shaila reproves Meena for her make-up, accusing her of trying to look older, and Meena finally accepts to take it off at her father and her Auntie's insistence.

After Meena comes back down and notices the various groups that have formed, she realizes that her mother's tranquility and elegance will always make her feel insecure, since, by comparison, she is too awkward in her own body. Meena's father then begins to sing, and Meena is deeply moved by the music, feeling as though she is reconnecting with a country she does not know but which forms part of her identity. After her father is done, everyone asks Meena to sing. She knows that, however much she refuses, she will have to give in, because it is customary for Indians to understand "no" as a form of modesty. Meena recalls an anecdote in which her mother politely offered their neighbors the Mitchells a ride, expecting them to refuse, but they accepted, thus forcing her to drive them to the shops.

Meena thus finds herself forced to sing. As Meena sings in Punjabi, though, she notices people giggling and hears Auntie Shaila say that she sings in Punjabi with a Birmingham accent. Embarrassed and confused, Meena interrupts her singing and decides to sing an English pop song, with a dance routine, which her audience welcomes enthusiastically, applauding Meena for her charisma. Meena then explains she loves the song so much that she "could shag the arse off it." This comment leads to the adults' sudden, shocked silence. Meena's father angrily asks her to repeat what she said but Meena, suddenly ashamed, does not. She fears for a second that her father might hit her and runs upstairs as soon as her mother suggests it.

In her room, Meena changes out of her Indian outfit. She goes back down after a long time, though no one seems to notice her, because everyone is so busy eating or getting food ready. Meena thinks of offering to bring people water, even though she hates how the men never even look at her, merely expecting for their water to be refilled, but she then overhears her mother talking to Auntie Shaila about her. Her mother complains about Meena's frequent bad behavior, and Auntie Shaila says that she is probably seeking attention. Mama then enumerates Meena's various lies and misdeeds. At one point, Meena interrupts the conversation by saying hello. Embarrassed, mama asks her if she wants to eat, but Meena says she is going to use the toilet.

Meena's lie about being fine reveals her confusion about being treated badly by the other children at the fair. It suggests that there are some aspects of life, such as sex, that she does not feel she can easily discuss with her parents, who might be shocked. Meena's desire to wear make-up highlights her efforts to become like Anita and her friends—that is, to feel accepted and popular.



Meena suffers from insecurity whenever she compares herself to other people—be it her mother or people like Anita and Sherrie. It is only at the end of the novel that Meena will have the confidence to trust in her own self, regardless of the opinions of people like Anita. Meena's confusion about her cultural identity derives in part from being considered a foreigner while not actually knowing India, yet still sharing so many Indian customs with her parents. It is only once she meets Nanima that she will feel her Indian identity coalesce into something tangible.



Auntie Shaila's comment is not necessarily meant to harm Meena, but it does increase the young girl's insecurities about the issue of belonging. Later in the novel, Meena wishes she had grown up speaking Punjabi and could immerse herself more fully in Indian culture. In this episode, though, she affirms another aspect of her identity: her British culture. Although Meena's comment is vulgar and sexual, the adults' reaction seems disproportional, since Meena is clearly confused and doesn't know what she's actually said.



Although Meena enjoys the moments when her Indian acquaintances are all together, she does criticize the inequality she notices in some of these events' dynamics, such as rigid gendered roles, which she perceives as unfair and rude. Her mother's worries reveal her desire to protect Meena and allow her to grow up into a good person, but they also make Meena feel judged and alienated. Part of the problem lies in the fact that Meena does not actually mean to disappoint her parents, but that she feels attracted to the kind of exciting, rebellious attitude that Anita demonstrates.



After stepping outside, Meena heads toward the fair instead of their outdoor toilet. She notices Sam Lowbridge and his friends. When Sam sees Meena, he offers to teach her how to shoot a gun. Meena feels honored to feel Sam so close to her, helping her make the right gestures to shoot the gun. When they succeed in shooting a target, Sam places their prize, a plastic bracelet, around Meena's wrist.

Meena then walks toward Sherrie and Tonio. She sees a bruise on Sherrie's neck and does not understand why Sherrie seems so happy about it. She wonders if such abuse is a normal feature of spending time with boys. Meena then sees Anita and her mother Deirdre get out of a ride. Choosing to forget what happened earlier, Meena waves at her and, after waving back, Anita immediately kisses Dave, which Meena understands is meant to impress her.

Anita then yells at Meena that she is going to buy some food and Meena agrees to wait for her. Once Anita is gone, Meena is shocked to see that Deirdre, who has taken off her heels, is running with the Poet toward the caravans. Meena sees them kiss wildly before Deirdre drags him inside a caravan.

When Anita returns, Meena decides that she will not leave the girl alone. She lies to Anita that Deirdre has walked toward their home and suggests they go on a ride. Meena notices that Anita is impressed by Meena's local accent and the fact that she is alone at the fair at night, without her parents. Without offering Meena any French fries, Anita gobbles them up and the two of them walk toward the rides.

When the girls finally get off their last ride, hours later, after Anita has screamed to Gary to tell the Poet to call her tomorrow, Meena once again tries to keep Anita away from the caravans. However, Anita leads Meena past the caravans toward the **Big House**. Meena is shocked and frightened to see Anita open a section of the fence and walk into the Big House's yard. Meena tells her that they have dogs, but Anita replies that she has never seen any and that she thought that Meena wanted to hang out with her. Meena, who is still wearing her mother's **necklace**, holds onto it as though it might bring her good luck.

Paradoxically, instead of reassuring her mother about her behavior, Meena adds a lie to her long list of misdeeds, revealing her need to escape what she perceives as the stifling atmosphere of her home. Sam's affectionate behavior toward Meena suggests that he is perhaps not as scary as he seems.



In this case, Meena's mention of abuse is misguided, since Sherrie's behavior suggests that anything she has done with Tonio is consensual (the bruise is probably a hickey). Meena's willingness to forget about Anita's earlier disdain without mentioning anything to her reveals how little actual trust and accountability exists between the two girls.



Deirdre's behavior is shocking in its sexual recklessness, but also in Deirdre's utter lack of concern for her daughter's feelings. Instead of behaving like a protective mother, Deirdre behaves like Anita's romantic rival.



Meena's lie here serves a good cause: keeping Anita from pain and humiliation. This reveals that Meena truly has Anita's well-being at heart, even if Anita is more interested in merely asserting her authority over her. It also suggests that some lies actually serve good causes, and are not always morally condemnable.



The episode with the caravans reveals how fragile peace in Anita's family is, as Anita could easily discover her mother's treachery. The girls' entrance in the Big House shows that Meena is choosing to obey Anita's natural authority instead of her instincts and sense of prudence. This suggests that Anita is potentially capable of manipulating Meena into taking part in other misdeeds, using Meena's loyalty to her benefit.



Meena decides to follow Anita, who shows her Hollow Pond, where Jodie Bagshot drowned years ago. Meena knows never to swim there, because it is made of many tunnels in which one could easily get lost and drown. Meena is terrified, which only makes Anita laugh. The two of them walk in the yard and Meena looks through the house's windows, where she notices a diamond chandelier. Anita then points to her secret spot, an object a few steps away that looks like a statue in a dome with marble pillars. Meena wants to see what it is and walks toward it, fighting vegetation and spiders. Finally, she reaches the dome and pulls at the plants covering the statue. Suddenly, she realizes that the statue is a representation of Ganesha, the Hindu elephant god.

The sudden sound of Anita running interrupts Meena's moment of fascinated stupor, and Meena realizes that an angry dog is following them. Completely panicked, the two girls run as fast as they can, and when Meena finally slips through the fence, into Anita's arms, Anita closes the fence again. In her panic, Meena has hit herself and is now bleeding on her face. Her clothes are also torn. As the girls walk back home, Meena dreads what the adults will say to her. She also realizes that she has lost her mother's **necklace**. However, when Anita asks her what the statue was, Meena says it was nothing.

When Meena reaches her home, which is still brightly lit and full of activity, she is surprised to see that no one is paying much attention to her and notices that the adults look scared and sad for her. Auntie Shaila drags her into the kitchen and, as Meena tries to decipher people's expressions, she hears an ambulance. She then sees her mother on a stretcher, in pain. The neighbors are there, and Mrs. Worrall offers to do a rotation to make sure that Meena and her father eat. Meena goes to stand by a girl named Clara Mitchell, who is known to have mental problems, and hears the girl sing to herself.

CHAPTER 6

After Meena's brother Sunil is born, she decides that she immediately hates him, although she is surprised by the wisdom that she perceives in the little boy's eyes. Years later, Meena's mother tells her daughter about feeling the baby's placenta fall out and receiving a cesarean at the hospital before the anesthesia was fully working. When mama complained to the nurse, the nurse simply told her to shut up. Mama also recalls that, when Meena was born, the nurse told her that Asians have a low pain threshold.

Although nothing happens to the girls that night, the pond remains a symbol of danger and death, as Tracey will later experience. Anita's disregard for her friend's fear again shows how little interest she has in other people's feelings. Meena's fascination with the luxury of the Big House suggests that its inhabitants must be much wealthier than her, and thus out of her reach, but the Ganesha statue shows a surprising affinity between Meena's most intimate cultural traditions and the Big House. This mystery will later be solved when Meena meets its Indian owner.



This episode has the potential to make the two girls bond over a shared dangerous event, but it merely highlights the gap between the two girls' family lives. Anita is left free to wander around, while Meena's, parents are more inclined to maintain discipline to ensure Meena's safety. Meena's unwillingness to tell Anita about the Ganesha statue also highlights the cultural divide between them, as Meena is not yet ready to share an intimate part of her Indian culture and family life.



For once, Meena does not have to lie to get out of an unpleasant situation, as it is only much later that her mother will realize that she cannot find her necklace. The confusing situation at Meena's house suggests that her mother has probably had an accident and will need to stay at the hospital for a while. Clara's singing highlights the surreal nature of this entire evening—from the strange atmosphere at the fair to the Big House and now this mysterious medical event.



Meena's hatred for her brother clearly relates to personal feelings of jealousy, not to anything her brother has done. Later in the novel, Meena will learn to love her brother for who he is. The fact that Meena's mother only told her about the racial discrimination she suffered at the hospital years later reveals her efforts to shield her daughter from injustice and negativity.



Once Meena's brother Sunil enters their household, everything changes. During the weeks when mama is in the hospital, Meena lives alone with her father and feels free to see Anita as much as she wants. She discovers that Deirdre too is in the hospital. Anita says that her mother claims her father Roberto beat her up, but that Deirdre is lying and hurt her arm with a dart to sustain her lie. Meena wonders if Roberto discovered what happened with the Poet. When Meena asks Anita about Sherrie and Fat Sally, Anita angrily replies that Fat Sally's mother does not allow her to go out anymore. Meena understands this as a signal that Fat Sally's mother thinks of Anita as a bad influence and finds this exciting.

When mama returns home, she spends most of her time taking care of Sunil, and Meena decides to spend most of hers with Anita. The two girls decide to start a gang, like Sam Lowbridge and his friends. They team up with younger children and establish their headquarters in an old pigsty in the yard. Meena brings some old objects from her bike shed and Anita brings *Jackie*, a teenage magazine aimed at girls. Meena is fascinated to read about how girls should behave in relationships with boys, though Meena realizes that all the girls in the magazine are pretty and look like Anita or Sherrie.

Anita and Meena call their gang the Wenches Brigade. The two girls plan their future life in London together and Meena follows along as Anita leads the entire group on strolls through the village. Anita buys sweets at Mr. Ormerod's shop and the two of them talk, though Meena notes that this consists of her listening while Anita shares her thoughts. Meena admires Anita greatly, feeling as though her irreverent comments allow her to express a part of her personality that she has never been able to explore.

Anita always ends up talking about sex. One day, she leads the group to spy on Karl, one of their young followers, while he is urinating. Karl shrieks when he notices that everyone has seen him pee. His twin brother Kevin then says he can hit a nearby clover patch with his pee. Meena feels underwhelmed by the sight of the boys' penises, which she compares to mushrooms. Anita then says that the girls should take part in the competition. After one girl runs away in fear, Anita decides to go first. She swiftly takes off her underwear, throws it to her confused sister Tracey and reaches the target.

The details of Anita's family situation remain largely unexplained. Although there is evidence of abuse in the household, it is unclear whether Roberto hit Deirdre—in which case Anita might be covering up for him—or Deirdre actually tries to make her life more dramatic than it is. Either way, the lack of trust between Anita and her mother is obvious. It is possible that, if Robert discovered his wife's adulterous behavior, Anita too might have discovered that her mother had sex with the boy she liked.



Anita's efforts to behave like Sam Lowbridge's gang are an early indication of her desire to become close to him. This will later have deeply negative consequences, as she takes part in hateful actions such as the beating of an innocent Indian man. Meena's discomfort with the girls' magazine is cultural and racial. Meena knows that she does not fit what society typically expects of a beautiful, white English girl.



Despite the fact that Meena and Anita created this gang together, Anita's desire to monopolize authority is obvious. The inequality between the two girls extends to personal matters, as Anita shows absolutely no interest in Meena's life. Although Meena initially accepts herself as Anita's silent listener, she will later become aware of the superficiality of their relationship, and realize that she doesn't actually need Anita to still express her own wild, creative side.



If Anita enjoys making others feel embarrassed or humiliated, she also wants to prove that she herself can't be humiliated—in this case, by demonstrating that she is not scared to pee in front of everyone. This mix of coercion and recklessness serves to impress others, making them both fear and admire her. Meena's disappointment in the boys' penises shows that, unlike Anita, she has little interest in sex.



Then, Anita forces Tracey to participate. She tells her to take off her pants. Shaking, Tracey does so. Meena notices how thin the girl's legs look and begins to feel very uncomfortable. She wants to stop the game there and leave Tracey alone, but Kevin and Karl then begin laughing, saying that Tracey has poop on her behind. Instead of defending her sister, Anita joins in, mocking her. Crying, Tracey tries to put her pants back on. In the meantime, Meena tries to forget what she has seen: thick bruises on the inside of Tracey's thighs, showing the mark of ten fingers.

Meena decides that she needs to act quickly if she does not want Anita to start picking on her. She takes off one leg of her pants and begins to pee, though it falls down her leg and into her shoes. Anita complains that Meena should have taken off her pants completely but Meena ignores her comment and begins to behave in a clown-like manner, to make everyone laugh. However, she remains secretly disturbed about what happened to Tracey. She concludes that even one's friends can suddenly prove cruel and hateful, creating a group hostility aimed at excluding and humiliating others.

Reflecting on these events, Meena realizes that she has recently noticed such behavior among Tollington's adults as well. After the villagers learned that a new motorway would pass through Tollington, they began complaining to the authorities, with little success. Meena noticed that people's reaction was to begin whispering about any stranger who appeared and dividing up into groups criticizing other people, such as Anita's mother Deirdre. This led Meena to conclude that the village is not as tranquil and tight-knit as she has always thought. In addition, while authorities attempt to revive industry in the region, life in Tollington remains the same: teenagers grow up, get married, and move to find a job.

After the peeing competition, Anita sits down with Meena and tells her about sex, finishing her talk by noting that, afterwards, the woman needs to wash herself with gin and vinegar to avoid pregnancy. Meena then realizes that her parents must have had sex to have Sunil, and feels disturbed. She also does not understand why adults are so critical of sex when they take part in it themselves.

Anita's bullying grows crueler when it affects her own sister, who one might assume she should take care to protect. Meena's sudden discovery of Tracey's bruises is even more disturbing. Even though Meena does not mention it again, perhaps not perceiving the gravity of this situation, the evidence of abuse is undisputable. This reveals a dark side of sex and makes Anita's obsession with sex seem more perverse, as it remains ambiguous whether or not she knows about Tracey.



Despite following Anita around, Meena is highly aware of the dynamics that exist between Anita and the other children. Meena also proves strong and courageous in exposing herself, yet doing so to limit embarrassment and humiliation. Her discovery of the dark side of group dynamics serves as a prelude to the lack of trust she will later feel toward the Tollington community, as she realizes that some people are capable of turning on others for no apparent reason.



Although the villagers' hostility does not yet affect Meena personally, Meena notices that people's hatred, directed toward people such as Deirdre, has nothing to do with the actual cause of their frustration: the construction of a new motorway. She understands that this type of hostility is fueled by feelings of powerlessness, which have to do with structural problems related to industry and employment, and not with local people's actions—even if locals might be the first ones to suffer.



Despite all her boasting, Anita's knowledge of the concrete and health-related aspects of sex is clearly limited, since she believes that washing oneself is sufficient to avoid pregnancy. Such erroneous beliefs are potentially dangerous, as they keep young people like Meena from protecting themselves adequately.



Though Meena finds the idea of sex disgusting, she also wonders if anyone will ever find her attractive. After reading the questions that readers send to *Jackie*, full of angst and suffering, she decides to send an enquiry of her own. She explains that she is brown but does not wear thick glasses and wonders if she will ever attract a boy. The answer tells her to wear make-up, that Michael Jackson is doing fine, and that Meena should simply be herself. Meena is disappointed by this answer. She concludes that the girls writing to *Jackie* will soon overcome their problems, whereas Meena will forever be stuck in a brown body. Overcome with shame, Meena begins to avoid mirrors, stop wearing Indian clothing, and keep a safe distance from her parents in the street.

During this troubled period, Meena celebrates her tenth birthday. She tells her parents she wants neither presents nor a party, but she still receives clothes from her mother and books from her father. That Saturday, her parents throw a party for her. Mama, who thinks that Meena might be jealous of all the attention Sunil is receiving, asks papa to talk to her. Meena and her father go for a walk, during which papa asks her if something is bothering her. He says that she used to be happy and that she no longer talks to him. Confused and scared, Meena wonders if her relationship with her father truly depends on the exchange of words and not on a greater bond.

When Meena explains that she now has her own friends, her father asks her why she spends so much time with Anita Rutter instead of Auntie Shaila's daughters Pinky and Baby, whom Meena used to enjoy. Meena replies that they are boring. She knows that these two girls represent the typical Indian girl that she should be: polite, discreet, and kind. Meena, by contrast, wants a wilder life, full of outdoor adventures.

Instead of longing to be something she is not, Meena then concludes that she is neither a Tollington native nor a full Indian girl, and that she is beginning to accept this feeling of being stuck in between two identities. She also concludes that Anita recognizes what the two of them have in common: a rebellious soul behind a seemingly dutiful attitude. Meena's father, though, says that she should help her mother more with domestic tasks instead of spending all her time with her friends.

Meena's worries about her looks have little to do with the actual features of her body, and mostly with racial discrimination. By reading so many magazines, she has absorbed English society's harmful belief that being a person of color equates with being unattractive. The magazine's answer only reinforces such ideas. Instead of telling Meena that skin color should be irrelevant to people's judgments and to her own sense of self, they encourage her to cover up her skin with make-up. This only makes Meena feel more insecure and out of place.



Meena's parents' efforts to make Meena feel loved and celebrated reveal their commitment to their daughter. Their belief that she would benefit from presents and a party despite her professed wishes also shows that they do not necessarily believe Meena always knows what is best for her, and want to give her the guidance she needs. Meena's fear that she might lose her strong connection with her father underlines the importance of this relationship in her life, despite her fits of rebellion.



Despite papa's frustration and worries, he doesn't realize that Meena's frustration with what is expected of her does not involve wanting to take part in actual harmful behavior. Rather, Meena simply wants to be given the freedom to be a child. Implicitly, Meena is also rebelling against rigid gender rules, which force girls to be gentle instead of adventurous like boys.



In trying to define her cultural identity based on personality traits, Meena does not yet realize that there are myriad ways to be "Indian" or "English," beyond the narrow definitions she is used to. It is only at the end of the novel that Meena will realize that she is free to call any place her own, as long as she stays herself.



That evening, Auntie Shaila brings her two daughters to Meena's birthday party. Although Meena used to enjoy Pinky and Baby's presence, she now finds them too tame and childish. Therefore, when Anita comes to the door, Meena decides to follow her, taking her two cousins along. When the group reaches Mr. Ormerod's shop, Anita seizes the opportunity to steal candy from the counter while Mr. Ormerod is not looking. The cousins, who have assisted in the entire scene, are frozen in place, terrified.

Anita then challenges Meena to steal as well. However, Meena is too scared to behave quickly enough, and Mr. Ormerod appears while Meena is about to grab marzipan bananas. To keep from getting into trouble, Meena places a marzipan banana on the counter. Suspicious, Mr. Ormerod looks at Anita and asks her if she plans on buying anything. He knows that she has probably stolen something but, in the end, he avoids confrontation and asks Meena for a penny.

Stuck in this situation, Meena has the idea of asking Mr. Ormerod to grab some polish for her mother. While Mr. Ormerod is gone, Meena steals a jar on his counter that contains donations for babies in Africa, emptying out its contents in her skirt. Unable to get the coins out quickly enough, Meena puts it into Baby's jumper. She keeps Baby from making any sound by threatening her with death. When Mr. Ormerod returns, he notices that Baby is crying but Meena invents an excuse and the four of them exit the shop, after asking for a few extra marzipan bananas.

On their way home, the cousins protest about what has happened but Meena forces them to keep quiet by saying that she could easily tell the police they were accomplices in this crime. Anita is so impressed with Meena's attitude that she offers for her to co-lead their gang, and Meena is overwhelmed with pride, as well as a feeling of freedom from what she has just done. She decides to take her cousins back home and promises Anita to keep the tin so that they can buy things in the future.

Even if Meena does not necessarily want to harm others, she is attracted by a certain rebelliousness that is connected to illegality. However, the guilt Meena later feels, as well as her general distaste for violence, distinguish her from Anita, who enjoys taking part in exciting, dangerous actions as well as harming others.



Mr. Ormerod's suspicious attitude toward Anita shows that the young girl already has a reputation for misbehavior, whereas he still sees Meena as an innocent girl. This shows how dangerous it could be for Meena to keep spending time with Anita, as taking part in misdeeds could spoil her reputation, severing the trust that the community has in her.



Meena's act of lying and stealing is marked by symbolism, as she is not only taking money away from Mr. Ormerod, but also from the community (the people that contributed to the jar) and the children who might receive charity. This reveals that one's actions have consequences on the entire community—something that Meena will soon discover through Sam's racist words, which are both personally and universally harmful.



Meena's aggressive attitude toward the girls is moved by personal necessity—namely, keeping her parents from finding out what she did and punishing her. The fact that Anita is impressed with Meena suggests that Meena is on a dangerous path to become more like her friend. Meena's belief that Anita might actually keep her promise and make this relationship more equal soon proves to be nothing but an illusion, though. Apparently that nothing she does can actually bring Anita to be more open and generous.



Later that evening, Mr. Ormerod comes to the Kumars' house, after Meena has opened her presents and eaten happily, free of guilt. After Meena's father talks with the shopkeeper, he takes Meena aside and asks her if she knows anything about a tin that has gone missing from Mr. Ormerod's shop. In that moment, Meena finally realizes that she has done something horrible. However, instead of telling the truth, she accuses Baby of taking the money to buy sweets. Meena retrieves the tin from where she hid it. Her father insists on giving Mr. Ormerod ten shillings to cover the missing money, even though that is much more than what the girls took.

After convincing Meena's father to talk, Auntie Shaila discovers what has happened and decides to leave the house at once. Meena watches as Auntie Shaila hits Baby on the head before entering the car, and both girls begin crying. That night, Meena cannot sleep. She hears her father's footsteps and realizes that he cannot sleep either. The next morning, he does not look at his daughter and leaves the room as soon as Anita comes to call Meena at the back gate.

CHAPTER 7

When Meena later reads about the Sixties, she realizes that Tollington had no real sexual revolution of its own. In this global historical context, her family was even less noticeable. Meena recounts her family's excitement every time a brown or black face appears on television, even though the characters they depict are usual stereotypical and unrealistic. Her family members also complain about discrimination during the job-seeking process, as employers dismiss their potential as soon as they see their face. Meena concludes that truth matters little in the official narratives of history.

In Tollington during the spring, Mr. Pembridge and Mrs. Pembridge, who live in the posh section of the village road, organize a town-wide party called Fete. They ask local stalls to come sell products and use the benefits to serve a charitable cause. Most villagers are awed by the Pembridges' wealth and enjoy going to Fete to take part in the family's elegance.

The consequences of Meena's lies on other people finally become apparent. Not only does she shamefully accuse someone else instead of being accountable for her actions, thus exposing Baby to punishment, but she also causes her father to spend his own money to repair her actions. However, Meena's guilt is a positive sign of moral consciousness. This makes her less likely to take part in a similar action in the future, since she will already know that stealing and accusing others makes her feel bad.



Meena is clearly troubled by what she did, as being confronted by Pinky and Baby's pain keeps her from ignoring the consequences of her actions. Her father, too, senses that something is not right, and that Meena might have lied to him. He also understands that it's likely all of this has something to do with Anita's bad influence.



Later in her life, Meena attempts to understand Tollington and her childhood both through her personal experiences and through larger social and historical developments. Meena concludes that the society she grew up in was conservative, racist, and potentially oppressive in sexual terms (as Anita's superficial understanding of sex suggests). Meena's conclusion that her parents' or Anita's experiences do not fit the official narrative of history suggests that history does not necessarily encapsulate the experiences of more vulnerable, marginalized populations.



The inequality between the Pembridges' wealth and the rest of the population serves as a backdrop for the frustration that people like Sam Lowbridge feel about their socio-economic status and their lack of opportunities.



Meena's mother does not want to go to Fete with Meena and her father. Meena explains that mama has been overwhelmed by having to care for Sunil. To solve this problem, Meena once suggested that her mother could drop Sunil off at the orphanage so that she could get more sleep, which led her mother to be shocked and her father to force Meena to feed Sunil that day. Meena, though, notes that Sunil's problem is that he is too attached to mama, who in turn assents to his every desire, leading even relatives such as Auntie Shaila to suggest that Sunil should learn to be more independent.

At Fete, Meena hears Uncle Alan argue with Mr. Ormerod, telling him that he believe Africans should be free to follow whichever religion they want, instead of being forced to receive Bibles as charity, since having enough money to live a dignified life is an expression of God's will. Mr. Ormerod is so shocked by Uncle Alan's ideas that he avoids him for the rest of the day.

Meena recalls another time her father and she overheard Mr. Ormerod discussing Uncle Alan's ideas with another woman. Mr. Ormerod told the woman he believed it was the English's role to bring foreigners culture and civilization, instead of simply giving them material objects. When Mr. Kumar later told his wife what had happened, both of them erupted in laughter, though mama suddenly went quiet, wondering if Mr. Ormerod's opinions expressed how the English actually saw Indians: as uncivilized people desperate for modern utensils. Papa simply replied that the Tollington villagers have accepted them and never given them any trouble. Mama then angrily began recounting people's so-called compliments to her when they say she is "so English."

Meena also recalls the story of one of their friends, an Auntie, who was attacked by an anonymous white person, even though she had done nothing wrong. Troubled by a possible relation between Mr. Ormerod's words and violent, discriminatory deeds, as well as what she has witnessed in Anita's gang, Meena begins to feel suspicious about the difference between strangers and friends. Fete, she explains, will soon reveal the presence of strangers among the people she knows.

Meena's parents' reactions to her proposal reveal their fear that Meena might feel completely detached from her brother and not yet understand that he is a permanent part of the family—one that she should love and cherish. Despite Meena's shocking attitude, she is correct in noting that her mother is overworked. Mama's later breakdown will confirm that she wishes she received more help in taking care of her son.



Unlike Ormerod, Uncle Alan does not consider himself superior from different cultures. Mr. Ormerod, by contrast, believes that conversion equates with moral salvation. This perspective essentially ostracizes anyone whose religious beliefs might be different from his own.



Mr. Ormerod has a racist, condescending attitude toward other cultures. He is unable to understand that English norms are not universal, and that other people should be given the freedom to express their culture however they please. His attitude is reminiscent of colonial beliefs, which constantly subordinated the natives' well-being and desires to the dominating powers' decisions. In this sense, although colonization has ended, it appears that people like Mr. Ormerod have learned nothing from history.



Meena's recollection of this violent episode is scary, but remains detached from her life. Meena does not yet realize that she will soon be confronted by such a horrific episode herself, when Sam Lowbridge and his gang take part in the beating of an innocent Indian man. Meena realizes that violent deeds and racist comments are all part of a single ideology: the belief that certain groups of people are superior to others.



At Fete, Mr. Pembridge makes a speech about the Tollington community. Sam Lowbridge, who Meena is shocked to see has cut his hair close to his scalp, interrupts him. Accompanied by his group of friends, he screams some vulgar comments to Mrs. Pembridge, who is much less elegant than her husband and has a miner's accent. Mr. Pembridge attempts to pursue his speech, arguing for uniting against the construction of the road through Tollington. People then rush through the gates to buy anything they can.

When Meena reaches Sandy's stand, she sees that the woman is selling home-made, shapeless stuffed animals, which look clumsily like various animals at once. Meena is sad to notice other people laughing at Sandy's creations until Hairy Neddy then arrives. He calls Sandy's animals "Space Gonks," loudly saying that all the other shops in Wolverhampton that sell these hybrid animals are out of stock. He then explains to the curious women nearby that these are famous educational toys meant to stimulate children's imagination. Hairy Neddy's speech is so convincing that people flock to Sandy's stand to buy these previously mocked toys.

Hairy Neddy then passes a note to an overjoyed Sandy, and Meena realizes that he is proposing to her. As Sandy begins to cry and everyone applauds, Meena concludes that this is the most romantic moment she has ever witnessed. Her father, though, is listening to an argument between Uncle Alan and Reverend Ince, the church vicar. After the discussion ends in a tense manner, Alan joins Meena and her father. When he asks Mr. Kumar what he thought of Mr. Pembridge's speech, Meena's father says that he does not particularly like Mr. Churchill—whom Mr. Pembridge mentions—because the English leader spoke of Gandhi in a patronizing way. Alan agrees with him.

Meena then leaves her father, who wants to go gambling. Her father loves to gamble, even though he is also very prudent, having experienced poverty enough to know that he does not want to put his livelihood at risk. Meena sees Anita talking animatedly with a fortune teller who looks mysterious. Meena agrees to give a demanding Anita her entire spending money to pay for this activity.

Sam Lowbridge's attitude can be seen as a rejection of the wealth that the Pembridges represent—that is, an expression of his frustration at not having many economic opportunities himself. His hostility toward Mrs. Pembridge suggests that he wants to humiliate her for not behaving in line with her social class. The fact that people's accents are capable of determining their social status suggests that there are cultural as well as economic barriers to social mobility.



Meena's sadness for Sandy once again reveals her empathy for those in a vulnerable position. Hairy Neddy's speech, which is nothing but a big lie, serves a good purpose: to allow Sandy to sell her stuffed animals. In doing so, Hairy Neddy not only helps his girlfriend, but also prevents people from mocking her. The threat of gossiping and mockery is constant in Tollington, and Hairy Neddy's ability to stop it at least temporarily reveals that people's passions can be directed toward positive goals instead of negative ones.



This romantic moment between Sally and Hairy Neddy shows that Meena's parents are not necessarily the only ones in Tollington who have a loving, healthy relationship, and that not all English abide by standards of emotion-free love. As the reader later discovers, this discussion between Uncle Alan and Reverend Ince concerns the allocation of the money raised. While Alan would want it to go to a charitable cause, the reverend is self-interested and prefers to use it for the renovation of his own church. Mr. Kumar's distaste for Churchill is a reminder that history is subjective, as its interpretation depends on one's national and cultural perspective.



Mr. Kumar's mix of gambling with prudence shows his sense of responsibility toward himself and his family, as he enjoys taking part in playful activities but remains conscious of their repercussions on other people. Meena gives Anita all her money, once again bowing to Anita's demands without protest.



Taking Meena's hand, the fortune teller tells her that her mother will soon have health problems but that they will receive help from overseas. She also mentions that, although Meena is intelligent and bound for success, she is under a bad influence and will need to lose everything before she can have a new start. Meena wonders if the fortune teller has been able to read her thoughts and see her tendency to lie, and quickly removes her hand.

Anita then gives the fortune teller her hand, looking serious. However, after taking it in hers, the woman refuses to read it. Anita yells at her to do her job and the woman resignedly tells her that her mother is gone and that Anita will marry young and have babies early. Irritated by Anita's complaints about this reading, the fortune teller reproves the young girl for always being in a hurry and tells her that an accident will happen in a few years. While Anita might get lucky, this depends on her efforts not to spoil the good things that come to her. Furious, Anita insults the fortune teller and leaves, taking the money with her. Afterwards, Meena tries to apologize for her friend's behavior, but the woman ironically asks her if she truly thinks Anita is her friend.

Meena spends the rest of the afternoon following Anita from a distance, since she knows not to interrupt Anita's fits of anger. She finds the positive and negative aspects of Anita's personality deeply seductive, and understands why people might be drawn to her. The girls then run into Sherrie and, after discussing wearing a bra—which Meena knows Anita doesn't, despite her claims—Anita asks Sherrie about her new horse, revealing underlying jealousy. Sherrie feels compelled to ask Anita to come ride it, and Anita says that Meena should come along, which makes Meena feel proud.

As the afternoon draws to an end, everyone waits around to hear Mr. Pembridge's speech. Meena notices her father waving a whiskey bottle at her, which he won by gambling. Mr. Pembridge then announces that Tollington raised the most money of all the villages in the region and lets Reverend Ince speak, while Uncle Alan, by his side, has difficulty containing his anger. The reverend announces that, instead of sending money for the missionary project in Africa, like Uncle Alan did last year, he wants to use it at home, to build a new roof for the chapel.

The fortune teller will prove particularly accurate in her predictions. The help from overseas is Nanima, who comes to help her daughter take care of Sunil. Although the bad influence is evidently Anita, Meena's admiration for Anita keeps her from understanding this.



This fortune reading puts many aspects of Anita's life in perspective. The woman's refusal to read Anita's hand suggests that Anita is affected by very serious problems, which might make her feel bad. Anita's problems with her mother and her predicted future put Meena and Anita's lives in stark contrast, revealing how bleak Anita's life actually is, despite her efforts to seem in control. Although this might make one feel pity for Anita, the fortune teller warns Meena that Anita is too self-interested to be her friend. Her judgment makes it seem as though there is little hope for Anita to change.



Meena's decision to follow Anita from a distance mirrors the very first day they spent time together, when Meena accepted to stay behind because she felt honored to be spending time with an older girl. This repetition of behavior suggests that the two girls' relationship has not evolved much, even though they spend most of their time together. Anita's moments of kindness still do not come from a desire to connect with others, but as a potential form of manipulation.



The reverend's announcement is clearly opportunistic, as he forgoes an opportunity to help others, preferring to serve his own interests. This stance is all the more shocking because of the man's role as a religious leader, which should encourage him to consider the well-being of others before his own desires. In contrast, Uncle Alan is actually interested in helping others.



The crowd expresses its discontent for such a disappointing way to spend money, and Sam Lowbridge, at the gate, suddenly intervenes, insulting the reverend's idea. He says that this project has nothing to do with Tollington residents. The crowd pays visible attention to Sam's words, and he continues to yell, arguing that the reverend should try to stop the diggers for the motorway. Uncle Alan tries to intervene and use Sam's energy for a good cause, arguing that everyone could vote about what they believe would be best, but Sam interrupts him, saying he wants this money to go to them, not to some anonymous "wogs."

At these words, Meena remains frozen in place. Though everyone suddenly becomes uncomfortable and looks at Meena and her father, Anita, by Meena's side, gives her friend no comfort. Meena is then horrified to hear a couple of people loudly agree with Sam. When she turns toward the direction of these voices, she is shocked to see that they are part of Mr. Ormerod's group, though the shopkeeper looks flustered. Meena does not understand how Sam, who has always liked her, could say such things. Finally, though, she hears people insulting Sam and telling him to go away.

Sam finally drives off on his moped, and Meena sees people offer support to her father. As she begins to walk toward him, Anita holds her back, telling her how alluring Sam looked. Shocked, Meena tells Anita that she is stupid and walks away. As they walk home, her father tells that she should always say something back to insulting comments, and then come talk to him.

When they arrive home, Meena can tell that something is wrong. They find her mother in the living room, with a sleeping Sunil on her lap. Mama begins to talk about how much she misses India, where she would have so many family members to help her out with domestic tasks. Meena walks up to her room to let her parents talk in peace, and wonders about the fortune teller's predictions. She feels frightened by everything that happened during the day and concludes that change is often unsettling.

The next day, Meena sees Anita and Fat Sally take a detour by her house to show her that they are walking to Sherrie's farm. Meena, however, is surprised to note that she does not care about their behavior. She falls back asleep, overcome by new emotions, and when she wakes up her father announces that her maternal grandmother Nanima is coming to England next week for a visit. Meena is then appalled to realize that the fortune teller's predictions are all coming true.

Sam's intervention initially seems legitimate, as he expresses the discontent that the entire crowd feels and thus serves as a representative for the villagers. However, his anger about the motorway already suggests that the real source of his anger is probably not the money itself, but larger, unrelated problems in Tollington. Finally, his attribution of the source of these problems to non-white people turns valid criticism into a gratuitous expression of hatred, no longer in line with his actual grievance.



Anita's inability to give Meena support suggests that she either does not care enough about Meena to do so or that she does not understand the gravity of the situation and the fact that people can be personally hurt by racist comments. Although there are only a few voices in the community that support Sam, this is enough to make Meena lose trust in her fellow villagers, as she realizes that even people she knows might harbor racist ideas toward people like her.



The community's show of support toward Mr. Kumar reveals that most people, unlike Anita, understand the gravity of the situation and want to protect this man who is one of them. Meena's harsh words to Anita represent her first act of defiance, as Meena proves strong enough to stand up for her principles even to her so-called best friend.



Mama's reaction is a mix of exhaustion, homesickness, and loneliness. Her desire for her Indian relatives to be present reveals how central family is to her. This contrasts with her current situation of isolation and, more generally, with what she perceives to be an English focus on independence and individualism.



Anita's behavior with Fat Sally only confirms what the fortune teller told Meena: that Anita is not a true friend, since she prefers to make Meena jealous and replace her with another girl than to actually solve the problems between them. Meena's indifference is a positive sign, showing that she is beginning to prioritize herself over Anita's desires.



CHAPTER 8

When Nanima arrives in Tollington, welcomed at Meena's house by her family as well as Auntie Shaila's, everyone in the village notices the old woman's arrival. After Nanima greets Pinky and Baby and then Sunil, she comes to greet Meena, who recognizes her mother's traits in her grandmother's face and begins to cry when Nanima whispers blessings in Punjabi in her ear.

In the house, when Nanima sits down in the chair that always makes leather farting sounds, she begins to laugh uproariously, which makes Meena giggle. Nanima then takes Meena's chin and tells her that she is a "junglee," a wild girl. Although papa insists that this is not a compliment, Meena feels ecstatic, because she can tell that her grandmother finds her amusing and is proud of her.

During the rest of the evening, Nanima answers people's questions about home, though she tells stories about people no one actually knows. Meena's father translates for Meena, and the young girl notices how happy everyone seems to be in Nanima's presence, as Nanima reminds them of their own parents. Meena finds her mother cheerful and strong again and, in that moment, promises to herself never to leave her, even if she has to travel around the world with her during her future successful career as a famous actress.

The evening, full of cheer and excited chatter, spills out into the yard, followed by the strong, spicy smells of Indian food. The women who pass by the house give Mr. Kumar many compliments, flirting with him playfully as they usually do, which makes Meena's father blush but amuses her mother. At one point, while the adults are drinking and smoking, Meena's father tells her that she should learn Punjabi. This disconcerts Meena, making her feel insecure and confused.

During the party outside, Meena witness two strange events. She sees a man drop Deirdre off near the **Big House**, and notices that Anita is waiting for her mother at the corner. Meena then realizes she has not spoken to Anita for a long time, because Anita has not forgiven her for what she said at Fete. Anita confronts her mother verbally but Deirdre then attacks her back, making her daughter cry. Although Meena is shocked to see her friend cry for the first time, she is even more stunned to see that there is a large figure in the Big House looking at her family's party through a window. Meena searches for her father to tell him about it, but when she turns back around, the face is gone.

Nanima's arrival reveals that the Kumar family is not necessarily as isolated as they may seem, since they benefit from strong support back home. This feels like a life-changing moment for her, reinforcing her ties to her family and her Indian background.



Nanima brings something new to Meena's life: the mix of family and fun. Instead of punishing Meena for her rambunctious nature, she understands it as a positive quality and wants to celebrate it. This allows Meena to begin to accept that embracing her Indian family and heritage does not necessarily mean erasing the more rebellious parts of herself.



Nanima's presence reveals how attached Meena's parents and extended family are to their Indian identity. It also highlights the difficulty of being an immigrant, as one is forced to live with underlying feelings of longing and sadness for the people who are not there. Meena's promise to stay with her mother underlines her attachment to her family, suggesting that her desire to rebel is not as strong as the love and responsibility she feels toward her parents.



The women flirting with Mr. Kumar mirrors their appreciation of Meena's mother, who is universally seen as a kind, warm person. This suggests that the Tollington villagers find the Kumars appealing and interesting, and that they are fully integrated in the social community. The idea of learning Punjabi is the first sign that Meena might benefit from immersing herself more in her Indian culture, instead of feeling ashamed about it.



The strange scene between Anita and Deirdre suggests that Deirdre is probably cheating on Anita's father Roberto—a hypothesis that will later be confirmed when Deirdre abandons her family to run off with her lover. For once, it becomes clear that Anita, who always surrounds herself with friends, actually suffers from loneliness and the need for actual love and care from her mother. This might explain why she often behaves like Deirdre, preferring to bully others than to reveal her weakness.



When Meena goes up to her room, Nanima is sleeping on one side of her double bed. Although Meena is initially reticent to climb in, she ultimately does. Nanima snores loudly and suddenly emits a loud fart, which makes Meena laugh. Nanima then takes her granddaughter under her arm, calling her Junglee, and falls back asleep. Although Sunil usually never sleeps through the night, Meena wakes up the next day to see him lying happily against Nanima, where mama had placed him that night. Since then, for the first time, Sunil begins sleeping full nights in his cot and sitting on papa's lap to eat breakfast.

Nanima's arrival revolutionizes life in Meena's house. Nanima's presence has magically allowed Sunil to distance himself from his asphyxiating relationship with mama and to extend his love to other family members, especially Meena. Meena finds herself happy to care for Sunil, whereas she used to hate such tasks. Convinced that Nanima is some kind of sorcerer, she also loves listening to Nanima's stories, usually sparked by what her grandmother notices on the television.

Through her exchanges with Nanima, Meena learns about British soldiers stealing chickens from her family and sending her grandfather to prison for refusing to fight in the British army. Meena initially wonders if her father (who translates for Nanima) is embellishing these anecdotes to make them seem more adventurous, but she soon realizes that Indian history is in fact full of dramatic events that stimulate her imagination. Instead of feeling shame for her Indian background and the history of India, which is so often described in patronizing terms at school, Meena now begins to feel proud of her identity and longs to discover India for herself.

Meena also discovers some of the less romantic aspects of life in India. After Nanima mentions how difficult it is for the poor to receive an education, mama tells Meena that this was the primary reason behind her decision to leave India: to give her children the opportunity to go to university without having to bribe officials. Meena then realizes that she will need to take the **eleven-plus exam** next year, which will determine which school she goes to: the fancy girls' grammar school or the new comprehensive school. Aware of her parents' sacrifice to invest in her education, she feels the pressure to succeed.

Nanima becomes a symbol of care and protection, allowing the entire family to thrive. Her ability to make Sunil sleep peacefully shows her positive effect on everyone, which will later lead Meena to believe that her grandmother has the powers of a sorcerer. Sunil has finally detached himself from dependence on his mother and is launching a new routine, which might be less exhausting for Mrs. Kumar.



The love that Sunil shows Meena in turn causes the young girl to want to take care of him. This suggests that love can have transformative effects, generating a desire to care and protect others. This situation puts Meena's relationship with Anita in perspective, as Anita's constant desire to humiliate others suggests that she is not capable of giving true love—and, perhaps, that she does not receive any herself.



The danger and violence that Meena perceives in Nanima's stories only make her more curious about India. It seems that part of Meena's personality—her turbulent, adventure-seeking side—is in line with her Indian culture, despite her feeling that she does not behave as a typical Indian girl should. Meena's desire to understand India better partly resolves her identity crisis, suggesting that, instead of hiding her Indian heritage, she should delve deeper into it, so that it might form an organic part of her life.



The stories Meena hears about India make the country seem more complex, and real. They make her curious about discovering the country for herself, but also highlight how lucky she is to be growing up in England. This dual idea suggests that Meena should invest in both aspects of her identity: her English education, which her parents have worked so hard to give her, and her Indian background, which makes her feel integrated into a greater community.



One day, at the beginning of Easter holiday, when Meena, Sunil, and her mother come home, they cannot find Nanima. Walking out to search for her, they run into Deirdre and ask her if she has seen her, but Mrs. Worrall then yells to them that Nanima is with her. Mama feels relieved and is about to leave, but Deirdre then asks her if she has stopped Meena from seeing Anita. Both Meena and her mother understand that Deirdre probably feels insecure because mama, despite being a foreigner, is more successful and popular in the village than Deirdre is. Mama thus adopts a conciliatory tone, saying that Anita is always welcome at their home.

Meena and her mother then go to Mrs. Worrall's house, where they are bewildered to discover Nanima speaking in rapid Punjabi with Mr. Worrall, who tries to grunt and gesture to her in response. Meena concludes that the two of them must understand each other beyond language barriers. Mrs. Worrall tells mama that Nanima says she has not left the house much and encourages them to take her out more.

Ten minutes later, Meena finds herself walking in the street with Nanima and Sunil. Meena attempts to use the few Punjabi words she knows to communicate with her grandmother. When the village women see Nanima, they begin asking Meena many questions about her. Although Meena understands they are trying to be friendly, she does not want them to see Nanima as an inferior and invents that her grandmother speaks four languages, owns mineral mines, and knows how to ride a motorbike. The women are amazed by these anecdotes and admire Nanima.

When the man whom Meena calls Mr. Topsy arrives, everyone is shocked to hear him speak Punjabi with Nanima. Meena then discovers that his real name is Mr. Turvey, and feels furious about the fact that a stranger speaks Punjabi when she still hasn't learned it. Mr. Turvey explains that he served in India for ten years and adored the people there, but that what the British did in the colony was cruel and unacceptable.

Meena and her grandmother then go to Mr. Ormerod's shop to buy groceries. Meena, who sees Mr. Ormerod chatting with a member of his church group—the same group that encouraged Sam Lowbridge's racist comments at Fete—does not want to go in and sends Nanima in alone with a list of groceries. She watches as the man looks mockingly at Nanima, with a mix of curiosity, revulsion, and pity.

Deirdre's concern for her daughter is surprising, since she seems so uninvolved in Anita's personal life and never showed any interest in being kind to Meena. Her attitude is both selfish and caring, since her desire to protect her daughter also reflects her indignation at being treated worse than a foreigner. This highlights Deirdre's insecurity as well as her underlying racist beliefs, seemingly shocked to discover that Meena's mother can be both dark-skinned and popular.



Nanima's surprising exchange with Mr. Worrall suggests that language and cultural barriers need not be an obstacle to true respect and understanding. This also highlights Nanima's exuberant, outgoing personality, as she does not mind chatting with someone who cannot actually answer her in her own language.



Meena's attempts to communicate with her grandmother in Punjabi show that she still has a lot to learn about India, but that she is eager to immerse herself more deeply in her family's culture. Meena's lie once again serves an admirable purpose: protecting her family and fighting racism. Despite feeling relatively integrated in the community, Meena remains weary of white people's feelings of superiority.



Mr. Turvey's surprising linguistic and cultural knowledge suggests that some people in Tollington might prove to be allies in her fight against racism. Mr. Turvey's condemnatory attitude toward British colonization reveals that some people's moral principles can prove greater than their nationalistic attachments.



The man's attitude toward Nanima reveals that racism sometimes involves complex, contradictory attitudes. As the mix of curiosity and pity suggests, racism is often born of ignorance—an inability to open oneself to a completely different social and cultural world in a judgment-free manner, without considering one's own traditions superior.



When Nanima returns, Meena counts the change and realizes that some is missing. Furious, she walks back into the store and angrily accuses Mr. Ormerod of cheating her grandmother because she does not speak English. Meena adds an angry comment about the church roof and Mr. Ormerod, embarrassed, apologizes for that event. However, he explains that the missing money covers the chocolate bar that Nanima bought. Surprised and embarrassed, Meena leaves the store to see Nanima and Sunil gobbling up chocolate. Meena feels tired all of a sudden and begins to push the pram back home angrily.

On their way home, they run into Uncle Alan talking to Sam Lowbridge and his friends. Meena overhears Alan tell Sam that he should use his energy to go after the true culprits, the rich and privileged, instead of honest workers trying to live in a dignified way. Uncle Alan greets Meena and tells her that he was having a chat with Sam about the danger of directing one's anger toward other people instead of recognizing one's personal frustrations. Meena simply says that Sam is "a prat" and Sam, surprised, asks her if she is angry at him. Meena feels overwhelmed with anger and a headache, but Nanima quietly steps forward and everyone falls silent, though Alan then greets Meena's grandmother.

On their way home, Meena keeps on feeling sharp pain in her head. When her mother sees her, she concludes that Meena has a fever. Meena lies down and wakes up hours later to see her father by her side. She asks him for water and her father gives her a special tea that Nanima made. During the night, she asks her father if she can play with Anita the next day. She remembers her friend crying outside her house and cannot get this image out of her mind.

Later during the night, Nanima comes to lie down and whispers sentences to Meena in Punjabi that Meena is surprised to understand. Nanima recalls her short childhood, getting married at sixteen, the death of one of her children, and then the arrival of British soldiers, who took everything away from her. After her husband's imprisonment, they had nothing left to live on and left for Delhi, where Nanima lived a second life, like a second birth. Mama is now living yet another one, and Meena as well.

Like Sam Lowbridge, although Meena's anger is justified, she too expresses it in a potentially violent way, disproportionate to the situation at hand. Mr. Ormerod seems to know his church has done something wrong, and that he does not necessarily agree with it.



Clearly some members of the Tollington community, like Uncle Alan, are devoted to fighting injustice, racism, and intolerance. Alan emphasizes that Sam has more in common with non-whites than he might think, since many immigrants are in the same situation as him: suffering from a larger system that does not allow them economic and social progress. Sam's surprise at Meena's anger shows that he does not actually understand who the target of his racist comments is, since he feels bad about hurting Meena but does not regret insulting people of color.



The supportive, loving atmosphere of Meena's family contrasts with the potentially treacherous outside world, revealing how important it is for Meena to have a safe place where she can feel at home. It seems that she still does not understand how dangerous and hurtful Anita can be, however.



Meena's sudden ability to understand Punjabi gives this scene a surreal quality, but also suggests that Meena might be absorbing more of her Indian culture than she realizes. This conversation allows Meena to understand that people's harsh circumstances do not impede them from living fulfilling lives.



CHAPTER 9

The next day, Meena leaves Nanima alone with mama, who is also on holiday. She goes to Anita's house, where Tracey answers the door, saying that Anita is at Sherrie's farm. Noticing how much Tracey has grown, and that her facial features express both gentleness and sorrow, Meena convinces Tracey to go with her. Tracey takes her dog along. When Tracey suddenly calls the dog by its name, "Nigger," Meena, angry, explains to her that this is insulting, and Tracey, who did not know that, apologizes, adding that she personally wanted to call it something else.

When the two girls reach Sherrie's farm, Meena chats with Sherrie's father for a few moments. He tells her that he will be paid for the fact that the motorway is passing through his farm and that his family will move out soon afterwards. After hearing this, Meena feels that everyone is moving away except her.

Although Meena expects Anita to get angry at her, Anita merely complains about Tracey being there. When Fat Sally challenges Meena, Anita defends her, saying that she is her "mate" and can therefore be here. Meena wonders for a moment if she will finally be Anita's equal.

Sherrie tells the girls to tie the dog up so that it doesn't scare the horses, and Anita insists on using Fat Sally's belt to tie him up. The girls then discover that it is not a belt, but an expensive scarf that belongs to Sally's mother. Anita, however, says that Sally's mother is rich enough to buy herself another one. The two girls get into an argument, and Sally tries to argue that her family is not rich.

The discussion turns violent when Anita mentions Sally's fancy school, arguing that the nuns at her school are too ugly to have sex. Sally throws herself on Anita, ripping hair out of her head, while Anita digs her nails underneath Sally's cheeks. Sally screams that everyone in the village says that Anita and her mother Deirdre are "slags," and Meena is shocked to notice Anita's acceptance of this violence, as though Anita had made Sally turn violent.

Meena expresses compassion for Tracey by including her. Although Meena does not mention this directly, Tracey's sorrowful face can be traced back to the fact that she is probably suffering from physical and sexual abuse. Tracey's surprise at learning that her dog's name is insulting reveals that she does not understand her mother's racism and that she does not actually want to harm anyone, unlike her older sister.



Although Meena has only mentioned leaving Tollington as part of her fantasies about her future as a famous actress, she now expresses a more urgent desire to leave, perhaps fueled by the racist attitudes she has discovered in her own community.



Anita's annoyance at seeing her sister reveals the lack of trust and companionship that exists between the two girls. It also highlights Anita's capacity to treat her relationships with frivolity, forgetting her anger at Meena as easily as it emerged.



Anita's lack of concern for Sally's feelings is obvious here, as Anita considers Sally's belongings available for her personal use. Anita also uses the class difference between the two girls to her advantage, highlighting this inequality to make Sally feel ashamed and coerce her into giving up her scarf.



Anita's apparent enjoyment of this conflict is confusing, since she not only enjoys attacking someone else but also does not seem to mind being attacked. This perhaps suggests that Anita, like her sister Tracey, is used to suffering from violence and abuse. It also highlights that Anita can be cruel to the point of irrationality, putting her own well-being at risk only to make fun of someone else.



In the meantime, Tracey's poodle has gone wild because of the fight and succeeds in breaking free of his leash. He runs out as quickly as he can, while Sally stops fighting to retrieve her scarf and leaves, soon followed by Tracey, who wants to find her dog. After the fight, with bald patches on her head, Anita calmly stands up to ride Sherrie's horse Trixie. When she does so, Meena is awed by Anita's horseback riding talent. She has a natural, completely fearless attitude on the horse, full of joy, which makes Meena feel better about everything that happened.

After Sherrie comments that it will be wonderful for Anita to have a horse so that they can ride together, Meena realizes that neither girl knows that Anita will never have a pony, and that Sherrie is unaware of the fact that her family will soon move. Meena suddenly feels pity for Anita, realizing that Anita perhaps needs her more than Meena needs Anita.

As Meena prepares herself to ride Trixie, they hear the sound of a car accident and run outside to see Tracey crying near the dog's body on the road, explaining that the car hit it and drove away. Hairy Neddy steps out of his car to help. He concludes that the dog is going to die soon but that he could never kill it. Anita then appears, with a mocking look on her face, and prepares to throw a rock at her dog's head. However, both Hairy Neddy and Sherrie prevent her from doing so. After releasing the rock, Anita goes limp.

When Meena returns home, she realizes that she does not even know how she walked home. Her mother tells her that she is early and asks her if she had a good ride, to which Meena replies automatically. She is overwhelmed by the image of the dead dog, which she realizes she has hated for his name instead of his personality. She concludes that this illogical hatred makes her similar to Sam Lowbridge, with whom she senses she will soon have another confrontation.

CHAPTER 10

A few days before the summer vacation, Meena notices Anita sitting by herself in the park. Anita goes to the comprehensive school, whose students Meena says always have a bored look on their face. When Meena walks up to Anita, she sees that the girl has been crying and asks her what is going on. Anita says that she has received her third year uniform and then adds that Deirdre has left them to live with a butcher. Meena does not know what to say, but Anita continues to talk, pointing to the uniform, saying that her mother does not even know her size.

In the same way that Meena had sought to distract herself after seeing Anita humiliate Tracey by making her urinate in front of everyone, Meena now seeks solace from the violent fight she has just witnessed. Anita's elegance on the horse contrasts with her usual attitude, suggesting that she might be able to use her talents to better purposes than acting cruel and domineering.



Meena suddenly realizes that, as children, Sherrie and Anita remain unaware of certain facets of adult life around them, such as the fact that their parents might be hiding information from them. Meena then feels a superiority that has nothing to do with Anita's efforts at domination, since Meena tries to use it to protect Anita instead of humiliating her.



For once, Anita's attempt to cause harm is not ill-intentioned, since she wants to kill her dog to put it out of its misery. She aims to present herself as someone without feelings, capable of committing violent acts without thinking, but she ultimately proves that she is not as callous as she tries to appear, since her body reveals her strain.



Meena is shocked by the innocent dog's sudden, unfair death, which causes her to reflect on her attitude toward the dog. Her realization that she has proven as obstinate and intolerant as Sam underlines her moral honesty. Although Meena might sometimes be inclined to lie, she is also capable of examining her conscience and drawing difficult conclusions about her own behavior.



The fact that Anita goes to the comprehensive school, whereas Meena hopes to work hard on the eleven-plus exam to go to the grammar school, highlights the difference in ambition between the two. The fact that Deirdre has left her family further emphasizes the huge gap between the two girls' families: Meena's loving, tight-knit circle and Anita's feelings of isolation and abandonment.



Meena concludes that her last interaction with Deirdre represented Deirdre's way of asking Meena to look after Anita after she was gone. Meena thus puts her arm around Anita but she reacts violently, asking Meena if she is a "lezzie," a word that Meena does not understand. Anita then asks Meena if she is a virgin and Meena, who is not sure what the word means, says she is, to which Anita confesses that she is too.

That evening, at dinner, Meena asks her parents if she is a virgin and they react with shock and anger, cursing Anita. Papa then stands up, grabs Meena by the arm and says that she has become a "rude, sulky monster," although mama intervenes to say that no one can control what Meena hears outside the house. Meena knows that her father always explodes in anger like this but later proves guilty and tries to apologize.

Meena's father asks her mother if they should move, and Meena begins to panic, although she has always secretly dreamed of leaving Tollington. Meena then announces that Anita's mother Deirdre has left, and both parents immediately change tones, showing pity for Anita. Mama then suggests that the neighbors should organize a rotation for Anita to have someone take care of the house and cook, but papa interferes, saying that Anita's family will find this insulting. Mama reflects for a moment and tells Meena to invite Anita over. Half an hour later, when Meena proposes this to her, Anita immediately asks if she can come that very night.

When Anita arrives, Meena is shocked by the girl's bad manners, even though she already knows that Anita is not particularly polite. When they sit down at the table to eat, mama asks Anita questions about school and her family, but Anita barely answers. Instead, she asks many panicked questions about the Indian dishes Meena's mother has prepared, as she has never seen such elaborate dishes before. However, mama had planned for this and also prepared fish fingers with fries, which makes Anita feel relieved. Anita then eats as though she had to fight to defend her food with her life, which makes Meena wonder if Anita receives enough food at home.

When Anita sees Meena's parents eat their chapattis and curry with their fingers, she is shocked and disgusted. To keep Anita from making unpleasant remarks, Meena explains that they always eat their food with their fingers, including at the fanciest restaurants. This time, her parents smile and repress laughter at Meena, even though she is telling a lie.

It remains ambiguous whether Anita's violent reaction to being hugged might have something to do with the sexual abuse in her home, but it certainly shows her discomfort with the sincere expression of love. However, she does let herself be momentarily vulnerable with Meena here.



Papa's reaction seems disproportionate to Meena's question, which is not meant as a provocation but a sincere interrogation about a word she doesn't know. Although Meena's parents are loving and progressive in other aspects of life, they do demonstrate a conservative reluctance to talk to their daughter about sex.



Meena's parents reflect their daughter's emotions regarding Anita: they all feel pity and compassion for someone who might be troublesome but is clearly in a vulnerable position. Their debate about whether it is right or wrong to intervene underlines the difficulty of navigating cultural norms. However, Anita's excitement at being asked to dinner reveals that she needs the community's support in these difficult times.



This is the first time that Meena fully grasps the difference between her upbringing and family values and Anita's. Anita, however, does not seem aware that her manners are insulting, but simply shows that she is unused to exploring any way of life outside the narrow limits of her own family. The fact that Anita might actually go hungry puts some of her behavior in perspective, as she might suffer from painful experiences that no one actually knows about.



This episode allows Meena's parents to understand that their daughter's lies are not always ill-intentioned, and that she sometimes uses them for good purposes, such as protecting her family from harm.



Throughout the evening, Meena notices that Nanima is expressing a strong dislike toward Anita. She blocks the television screen from her and behaves rudely toward her, complaining loudly about her in Punjabi. Anita insists on going to see Meena's room, although Meena feels embarrassed because she does not have the proper accessories for a hang-out among girlfriends, such as make-up and posters. However, Anita finds Meena's Indian outfits beautiful and asks her why she does not wear them more often.

After hours of trying on Meena's Indian clothes, the girls walk back down. When mama hugs Anita to say goodbye, Anita is so surprised by this gesture that she drops ten rolled-up suits she was hiding beneath her coat. In addition, Meena notices some of her magazines, her only record, and a few other accessories. Anita defends herself by saying Meena had accepted that she could borrow them, but mama asks her to put everything back, except the magazines. Mama uses her teacher's voice, but Anita reacts strongly. For a moment, Meena fears a confrontation, but Anita finally leaves.

When Meena asks her mother if Anita can come over again, mama says that they could do that if Anita asks Meena over to her house. Despite Meena's hints over the next few days, Anita never does.

Nanima's attitude is both highly perceptive and childish. Although she behaves like a child when tormenting Anita, she also reveals that she can tell, despite the language barrier and cultural differences, that Anita is behaving in an unacceptable way. Anita's appreciation of Meena's outfits suggests that Meena doesn't realize how lucky she is to be so immersed in another culture, whose beauty she takes for granted.



Anita's shock once again shows how unused she is to receiving affection from people. It seems that such expressions of love are completely absent from her life. Although it would be expected for Anita to show gratitude from having been so warmly received in Meena's house, she does exactly the opposite: taking advantage of her hosts' kindness by robbing them. Meena finds herself stuck between loyalty toward her family and a desire to protect her friend.



Anita's lack of invitation might indicate that she does not care about Meena's feelings, but could also have more to do with her own family—for example, the fact that her family is not very social, or that they don't have enough food to give guests.



CHAPTER 11

Meena explains that her childhood started to end during her tenth summer, like the fortune teller had predicted. The summer initially begins joyfully, as Meena's father is awarded a promotion. Meena then realizes that she does not know exactly what her father's work consists of.

Meena remembers going to her father's work party as a child, where her father had talked with a man with a strong Midlands accent named Bill. Bill's daughter looked at Meena for a long time and then extended a finger to touch her cheek. The second time, Meena bit her finger, which caused her father to yell at her. After sitting on Santa Claus's lap and receiving fake nails as a present, which did not match Meena's skin color, Meena was disappointed by the party, which her father seemed to understand, and never went to another one again.

Meena's retrospective reflection on the summer builds mystery and suspense. Her ignorance of her father's work highlights how little it means to him, beyond bringing his family some economic stability.



Bill's daughter's attitude suggests that this is probably the first time the girl has seen someone with a different skin color. Meena's anger emphasizes that she did not want to be seen as some exotic creature, but as an ordinary playmate. Later, her frustration with her gift only accentuated the fact that most of traditional English society is geared toward white people, which made Meena feel excluded and confused.



When Meena asks her father what a promotion consists of, mama explains that it means more money and a bigger office. Meena concludes that all she wants with this extra money is to go to India. Papa then decides that they will go to India for Christmas and bring Nanima “home” in person. Although Meena is happy about this, she wonders if her father considers their life in England temporary—not quite “home.”

A few days later, the family sees Sunil in the yard, looking at a spider. He begins to mutter words, pronouncing the names of his family members among words in Punjabi. Mama is impressed that her son can speak before reaching one year old, and Meena regrets not growing up bilingual herself.

In the meantime, during the summer, everyone seems to be enjoying a carefree life. Meena goes to Sherrie’s farm almost every day, where she spends time with Anita. However, although Meena learns to take care of the horse, she does not want to ride it because of her traumatic memory from the last time. She enjoys watching Anita ride but notices that if Anita is growing louder and more boisterous, Tracey is turning into an increasingly shy, scared person. Instead of taking part in the girls’ activities, Tracey prefers to stay on her own with a resentful look on her face.

Trouble begins when mama discovers that her diamond **necklace** is missing and Meena, who does not like remembering that she lost it, says that she knows nothing about it. Mama begins to wonder if Anita might have taken it, but concludes that she is perhaps being unfair and simply accepts that the necklace is lost. However, Nanima hears about this, she looks at Meena suspiciously, convincing Meena that her grandmother, to whom she attributes supernatural powers, knows what happened.

At that very moment, they hear rumbling and realize that motorway diggers have arrived in Tollington to destroy the school. The villagers step outside their houses, including Sam Lowbridge and his gang, who begin to insult the diggers and drive around them with their mopeds. After joining Meena, Anita wants to go see what is happening. The two of them run closer to the action, where they see television cameras led by a famous local reporter. Meena is also surprised to notice an Indian man who looks like a bank manager. When he looks up and sees her, they share a brief moment of recognition.

Meena’s desire to go to India reveals how much she has grown to love her parents’ country, which she now wants to discover for herself. At the same time, though, she remains attached to England as a home, and cannot separate this aspect of her life from her identity.



This tender moment in Meena’s family highlights the mixed environment in which Meena and her brother are growing up. Meena’s desire to speak Punjabi reflects her wish to immerse herself more in Indian culture and feel as though she fully belongs there.



Although Meena does not refer again to the bruises she saw on Tracey’s thighs, Tracey’s attitude can be understood in light of the potential violence she is suffering from. It remains ambiguous why she might harbor resentment toward her sister—perhaps because she wishes she too could enjoy some carefree fun—but the girls’ attitudes certainly emphasize how little connection exists between the two of them.



Meena’s effort to hide the truth from her mother does not reflect lack of guilt, since Meena feels very bad about losing the necklace, but can be understood in light of the fact that Meena would have to explain the entire context of that evening to her mother: that she left home without telling anyone, went to the fair to see Anita, and later snuck into the Big House with her. Although losing the necklace was unintentional, her parents would disapprove of Meena’s actions before that event.



Sam’s actions with his gang are potentially dangerous and violent, but seemingly show a desire to protect the community from destruction. Meena’s connection with the Indian man reveals an underlying bond based on culture, not on personal acquaintance. This highlights how isolated the Indian community is in certain areas of England, as well as the solidarity that often exists in marginalized communities.



Meena is furious to see Anita walking toward Sam, but Anita does not seem to care. However, Sam notices Meena and calls out to her with a smile, but Meena walks away. She then sees the Indian bank manager walk away and feels disturbed by the idea that he is on foot and will probably have to take a bus instead of driving his own car. When the machines begin to roar, destroying a wing of the school building in an instant, Sam's moped gang encircles everyone and Sam drives straight for the reporter, saying: "If You Want A Nigger For A Neighbor, Vote Labor!" before heading off.

Meena loses sight of Anita and walks home, feeling saddened and degraded by Sam's words. Back in her room, Meena wants to talk to someone about her feelings, but she knows that Anita, whom she considers her best friend, would never understand her. Meena then prays for the first time in years, asking God to forgive her for accusing Pinky and Baby of stealing Mr. Ormerod's money. She wishes the two girls were there, because she knows that they would understand her feelings about Sam.

The next morning, papa reads a report in the newspaper about an Indian man robbed and violently attacked in Tollington, to the point of suffering from head injuries and broken ribs. Although papa tells Nanima that nothing has happened, Meena and her parents avoid eye contact. Unlike Nanima, they know that this is an earth-shattering moment, capable of destroying Tollington as their home.

One day at Sherrie's farm, Anita and Sherrie begin sharing information about their respective bras. Meena does not want to be dragged into the conversation and stays away. However, when Sherrie touches Anita's bra to evaluate its material, Tracey suddenly appears, slapping Sherrie's hand away and yelling that she should not touch her sister. Both Anita and Sherrie then turn against Tracey, who begins to say that she has seen her sister let someone touch her. Anita quickly places her hand on her sister's mouth to keep her from speaking and pushes her away. Although Meena fears a fight, Tracey suddenly begins to cry and runs away.

Sherrie then asks Anita if she is seeing someone, but Anita refuses to say anything, although she smiles knowingly. At that moment, Meena realizes that her best friend has not told her about her boyfriend, and that she has made personal sacrifices for a friendship that is not reciprocal. Meena feels used, as though Anita were merely spending time with her while waiting for "the real thing" to arrive. Confused, she stands up and leaves, saying she is going to check on Tracey.

Anita once again proves that she does not care about Meena's feelings, and perhaps that she does not even understand why Meena would be angry at Sam. Sam soon acts just as racist as before, thus once again spoiling good intentions—annoying the diggers to protect the school and the community—with his words and his attitude. Meena's worry about the Indian man will later prove warranted.



This episode confirms that Anita is a best friend in name only, since she does not take on any of the roles one might expect from a best friend, such as comforting Meena when she is sad. Meena's guilt and plea for forgiveness suggests that she is perhaps trying to rid herself of bad influences—in her own self and in the pressures around her.



This moment proves to be a turning point for Meena's family, as everyone becomes aware that it might no longer be safe for them to stay in this community. They realize that, even though they have felt accepted by most Tollington villagers, the presence of a few violently racist people is sufficient to put them at risk.



Tracey's violent reaction to the threat of sexual harm to her sister is perhaps the result of her own negative experiences, or of Anita's. Although Anita later tells stories about her boyfriend, her effort to keep Tracey from talking suggests that what Tracey was about to relate might have to do with other circumstances, perhaps related to the abuse she suffers herself. Either way, Tracey's actions show that she does in fact care about her sister, even if Anita is often cruel to her.



Although Meena has accepted various forms of inequality in her relationship with Anita, she now reaches a point where she realizes that Anita truly never had any intention of reciprocating her loyalty. In the absence of trust and communication, Meena realizes that their relationship is meaningless, based on nothing more than a desire to pass the time.



After leaving, Meena still hears the two girls talking. Anita excitedly relates taking part in a “Paki bashing,” watching as the boys attacked a “Paki” waiting at a bus stop, who did not even try to defend himself. Then, Anita explains, Sam Lowbridge and she kissed for a long time.

Anita’s story about violently beating a “Paki” (Pakistani) man—who was in fact Indian—reveals her own racist beliefs. This proves that Anita truly is a cruel person. The fact that she hides this information from Meena suggests only that she fears a threat to their friendship, not any capacity to think morally.



After this, Meena does not remember things clearly. She throws up by the shed and suddenly decides to walk toward Trixie. After she mounts the horse, she gives her very little guidance, which soon leads it into a gallop. When the horse jumps over a bar, Meena feels herself detaching from the horse. She recalls the girls’ comments about the fact that her leg is pointing the wrong way, the smell of her own pee, and hearing her parents’ scared voices, before closing her eyes.

The shock that Meena experiences at discovering that her so-called best friend is violent and racist leads her to take part in extreme, self-destructive behavior. This perhaps represents Meena trying to escape her environment completely, making a radical decision to express her anger and cut ties with the world that has so disappointed her.



CHAPTER 12

In the children’s section of the hospital, Meena lies in between a girl called Angela and a very sick boy, Robert, who is in an isolation room. The doctor tells her she will be out by Christmas, in four months. This makes Meena panic and cry, as she realizes that she will miss Sunil’s birthday, have trouble studying for the **eleven-plus**, and, worst of all, that they will not be able to go to India. Her mother tries to reassure her, explaining that she will bring her school material and help her with schoolwork, that everyone will come visit her, and that they can go to India next summer.

It becomes apparent that family and school are Meena’s priorities in life, despite her occasional fits of rebellion. Her capacity to rely entirely on her family for support contrasts with the disappointing experiences she has had with friends such as Anita and Sam Lowbridge, who have proven to be potential enemies.



Meena remains haunted by the image of Anita watching her get into the ambulance. She imagines the girl’s joy at taking part in the Indian man’s beating and feels disgusted. Meena concludes that Anita and she were never compatible and, over the course of the days in the hospital, she begins to forget Anita. She realizes that this forced separation could be a good opportunity to separate herself from her friend once and for all.

Meena finally realizes that, more than any other aspect of Anita’s personality, the difference in moral principles between Anita and herself are too strong for friendship to be possible. Meena’s desire to separate herself from Anita marks a turning point in her life, in which she becomes more self-confident and more capable of standing up for what she believes is right.



Meena finds her roommate Angela boring and begins to converse with Robert, who writes notes to her from the other side of the glass. Meena is flattered that he would want to talk to her, and begins to feel better about being in the hospital. When she asks her parents to bring her paper and a pen, they are overjoyed, convinced that Meena might dedicate herself to study. Reflecting on her accident, Meena, in fact, realizes that her decision to mount the horse and to fall was her last deliberately sinful act, like all her lies, and that she now wants to be a better person. She resolves to focus on preparing for the **eleven-plus**.

Meena’s relationship with Robert immediately contrasts with her relationship with Anita, as this one is based on mutual communication and kindness. The spontaneous series of events that led Meena to break her leg represent an opportunity for Meena to turn her life around. Her decision to study marks her investment in her future, and represents an opportunity to leave Tollington’s now hostile community.



When Meena finally has paper and a pen, Robert and she begin playing games and exchanging pieces of information. Meena has always dreamed of having a boyfriend, but she had never thought that she would have such an intense relationship with a boy on the other side of an isolation window. The two of them invent their own language so that other people cannot read their notes, and soon realize that they are able to complete each other's sentences or read the other's thoughts. They can also judge from the other's body position whether or not they want to talk.

When Meena's parents arrive one evening with gifts and a birthday cake for Sunil, Meena realizes that it is already the end of October. She cannot believe that she has already been in bed for six weeks. When she notices that Nanima is refusing sweets—highly unusual behavior—she asks Nanima what is wrong and sees her grandmother wipe off tears. Her father then says that Nanima has decided to go back to India the next day. Although Meena feels as though her entire world is falling apart, she tries to hide her emotions from her parents, because she knows that adults do this all the time to shield their children from worry and grief.

At the end of the evening, Nanima leaves, blessing and lauding Meena in Punjabi, and it is only once Meena's family is gone that she feels the full pain of loss. She realizes that she has often faked sadness, but that she is now experiencing the full force of that emotion. That night, she does not exchange messages with Robert, but she knows that he is watching her.

One day, when nurses bring a plastic Christmas tree into the room, Meena notices that Robert's bed is empty. She desperately asks a nurse what has happened, and she explains that Robert is having some tests done. When Robert returns, Meena tries to make him laugh across the window but notices that he has bruises on his hands and is crying. She calls Sylvie, a nurse, to ask what is wrong, and she explains that Robert gets tired and depressed after some particularly painful tests.

On December 20th, Meena gets ready to leave the hospital. Nurse Sylvie, who knows how much Meena cares about Robert, explains that she has almost gotten herself into trouble for what she is about to do: let Meena into Robert's room. After putting on a surgical gown and mask, Meena enters Robert's room. Meena is impressed by Robert's posh accent, and Robert, in turn, is astounded by Meena's strong Black Country accent. He laughs and tells Meena he thought she would sound more exotic.

The relationship between Meena and Robert is based on understanding and equality, as they learn to adjust to the other and perfect their communication. It becomes obvious that this reciprocal relationship is a true example of friendship, whereas Meena's relationship with Anita was never sincere, as it only survived because of Meena's loyalty and Anita's desire for control.



Meena's grief at hearing about Nanima's departure shows the extreme closeness she has reached with her grandmother. It also highlights the difficulty of being an immigrant, whose extended family lives in other parts of the globe. Meena has developed a sense of responsibility and ethical behavior that makes her consider other people's feelings before her own, as she tries to hide her sadness from her family.



Meena's realization that she is feeling such strong emotions for the first time puts her relationship with Anita in perspective, suggesting that her bond with Anita must not be that strong. The loss of Nanima also deprives her of a vivid connection to her Indian background.



Meena expresses compassionate concern for Robert's well-being, showing the close relationship she has developed with this young boy. The apparent severity of Robert's illness foreshadows his later death. This episode puts Meena's problems in perspective, highlighting that she still has her entire future ahead of her.



The difference in accents between Meena and Robert signals a class difference, but also emphasizes their shared English culture. Robert's surprise at hearing Meena's natural English accent suggests that he automatically assumed she would sound foreign. Meena again challenges traditional categories of identity, proving that it is possible to combine two radically different cultures in one person.



Meena is initially quiet and shy, but they both agree to tell each other something the other doesn't know and Meena tells Robert that she is getting a bike. She then asks Robert when he is going to get better, and he admits he doesn't know. Meena then asks him if he has a girlfriend, and he takes Meena's hand in his, saying he does. Meena finds that she is breathing extremely fast and leaves the room, saying she will see him soon for her physiotherapy.

As Meena's parents drives her home, Meena is shocked to learn that the motorway is open, that Mr. Pembridge has sold some land in front of the Kumars' house, and that Anita's house looks dilapidated. In general, Meena finds the town unappealing. She also learns that Sandy and Hairy Neddy are now married, and that Cara Mitchell has been sent to an institution for treatment, which shocks Meena because she believes that the girl needs open spaces instead of seclusion. When they finally arrive home, papa announces that while this is their home, they cannot stay there forever. That night, while she is struggling with her crutches, Meena hears Sam's new motorbike outside. She sees him greet Anita and the two of them kiss.

When Meena goes to the hospital for physiotherapy, she is told that Robert is having some more tests and cannot see him. She leaves him a lighthearted note and the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*. However, when she does not hear back from her friend for a while, she begins to worry. Finally, she receives a letter in the mail from Robert's parents, announcing that their son has died and thanking her for making Robert's time in the hospital so happy.

CHAPTER 13

That year, Meena spends a lot of time on her own. She uses exhaustion as an excuse, and watches as the children are forced to take buses to school, which decreases the amount of activity on the street. The village is also overcome by traffic noise on the motorway, and Meena concludes that everything has changed. She notices more strangers spending time in the park, as well as Sam and Anita's gang smoking and drinking beer. Meena ignores them but watches them discreetly, which she notices Tracey does as well.

The fact that Meena's feelings are reciprocated bolsters her happiness and self-confidence, proving once and for all that she does not need to have white skin to be attractive. The tenderness of her relationship with Robert contrasts with Anita's attitude toward sex, which is focused on asserting power and control over others.



Meena's shock at seeing the village after a long time away reveals that Tollington is not as appealing as it habit and affection have made it seem in her mind. Her realization that Anita's house looks run-down emphasizes the dire situation Anita finds herself in, in terms of both socio-economic status and family life. Such observations, as well as Meena's comments about Clara Mitchell, once again reveal Meena's perceptiveness, as well as her ability to feel compassion for those she identifies as weaker than her. However, Anita's relationship with Sam only emphasizes how incompatible Meena and Anita's values are.



*The novel Meena gives Robert is symbolic, highlighting some of Anita and Me's influences. [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) relates the story of a young girl who, like Meena, comes to terms with the reality of racism and injustice in society. Other aspects of Anita and Me, such as the *Big House*, can also be considered directly inspired by *To Kill A Mockingbird*.*



The construction of the motorway has deleterious effects on community life. The fact that children are forced to go to school farther away makes the village less lively, decreasing opportunities for children to get to know each other. The increasingly hostile environment in Tollington suggests that this might be a good time for Meena's family to leave, before it deteriorates further.



Meena removes her cast at the hospital in mid-January, a sad experience since she is still overwhelmed by the grief of losing Robert. Although she is told she cannot do much exercise, Meena begins spending time on her bike. One day, Tracey appears out of nowhere, scaring her. Meena greets her and expects questions about how she has been, but Tracey merely announces that Anita is going out with Sam. She then angrily concludes that Anita is bound to end up like Deirdre, and asks Meena to stop her. However, with a pang of sadness, Meena replies that her friendship with Anita is in the past and that she no longer cares about her.

By the spring, when Sherrie's family has moved out and there are plans to turn the old school into a big supermarket, Meena feels peaceful in her own protected world. She begins to behave like a typical Indian girl, studious and serious. One day, she overhears her father complaining about how happy Meena used to be. Mama interjects that Meena is happy, but that she is growing up and it is normal for her to become more serious. Mama adds that she knows Meena will pass the **eleven-plus**, simply because she is her daughter, and that they should therefore already put their house on the market. However, only Meena's father understands that Meena has been affected by Robert's death, as her mother does not believe that Meena is old enough to worry about love and boyfriends.

Reflecting on her upbringing, Meena concludes that her parents' well-meaning efforts to protect her from the outside world only made her more desirous to rebel. Now, though, after having strong emotional experiences such as losing Nanima and Robert, Meena is able to see things with greater perspective and concludes that she is not a bad person. She accepts that she belongs wherever she decides to call home, and that she is strong enough to follow her own path.

Meena spends two intense weeks studying for the **eleven-plus**. During this time, however, when Tracey is standing guard on the street, Meena is harassed by people calling her, which she believes must be a mix of Anita's and Sam's voices. Later, they throw stones at her window and Meena finds that she cannot concentrate. She also receives notes with a strange mix of compliments and insults written on them, one of which makes her laugh because the author tried to spell chapatti and then gave up. Meena becomes worried about how this might all end.

Once again, the sadness that Meena feels at losing Robert's company contrasts with her indifference toward Anita. This highlights how superficial the two girls' relationship was. However, despite everything Anita has done, Meena still feels compassion for her former friend.



Even though the community is radically transforming around her, Meena has developed enough strength and self-confidence to rely on herself and her family for happiness—instead of seeking diversion with Anita. Meena's parents' debate about their daughter's happiness once again highlights their commitment to making their family a loving, supportive environment. Mama's trust in Meena's capacities serves as an optimistic signal that Meena is likely to have a bright future, thanks to her own talents as well as her parents' support.



Although Meena has always felt bad about not behaving like a typical Indian girl, she knows that her rebellious behavior was a reaction to the closed social world of her family, not an expression of immorality. Meena's trust in her own virtue gives her the confidence to value her personality (her moral consciousness and compassion) over cultural considerations, such as typical expectations of Indian girls.



Anita and Sam's actions make Meena feel threatened and emphasize how little these two youths are investing in their own future. Indeed, while Anita studies for her exam to leave Tollington, it is likely that Anita and Sam will remain stuck there, as the community deteriorates around them. Meena later realizes that Sam wrote compliments to her so that she would want to spend time with them. This suggests that Anita and Sam actually need Meena and benefit from her presence.



The night before Meena's **exam**, her entire family is tense. Her parents try not to mention the exam, although she knows that her family's future depends on her, since her success would justify all the sacrifices they have made for their children and also allow them to move out of Tollington. When the telephone rings, mama learns that Auntie Shaila's husband Uncle Amman has just had a heart attack. Meena's parents are very worried and, although they do not want to leave Meena alone, Meena insists that this is the best option. She promises not to open the door to anyone, and her parents set off with Sunil.

That night, when Meena is already in bed, she hears fierce knocking on the door and wakes up terrified. She goes down to the door and sees Tracey. Confident that Tracey is worthy of trust, Meena opens the door and Tracey immediately begins sobbing and yelling. Meena does not understand what is happening and asks her about her dad, but Tracey simply says that he is killing her. Meena believes that Roberto must be beating Anita and concludes that this would explain a lot about Anita's behavior.

Meena gets dressed quickly and slams the door. She runs after Tracey, who enters the **Big House** through a hole in the fence. Worried, Meena does not know what is happening and fears the potential dangers lurking around the house. She begins to pray to herself. As she follows an insistent Tracey, she wonders what she could possibly do to stand up to Roberto, and remains obsessed by the fact that she has an **exam** the next day.

Finally, they reach the top of a slope overlooking the pond. In a clearing, Meena sees Sam lying and moving on top of Anita, while Anita, on her back, remains motionless. Tracey is sobbing and the two of them wonder if Anita is dead. As Sam stands back up, Meena notices that Sam has a scar on his face and concludes that Sam is evil, behaving violently and enjoying harming others, such as foreigners. Sam calls Anita a "tart" and kicks her in the foot. When Anita remains motionless, Tracey suddenly begins to scream wildly, running toward Sam to attack him. Anita then suddenly opens her eyes, annoyed that her joke did not work.

In the meantime, Meena hides behind a tree and Sam easily picks Tracey up. Anita begins to insult her sister and Sam laughs at Anita, asking if she was immobile because he "shagged" her too much. Tracey explains that she thought her sister was dead and Anita sends her away. Tracey throws a large stone at Anita and the two of them run after each other in the bushes.

The pressure that Meena feels to succeed in school expresses both her own desire to succeed in life and her feeling of responsibility toward her parents. The possibility of leaving Tollington would open up a lot of doors for Meena's family, potentially allowing them to live in a more diverse community where they could feel safer and more included. Meena's parents' departure is ominous, and builds an atmosphere of impending disaster.



Meena likely intends to suggest that Tracey should not be alone at night, but should be with her dad. Meena's subsequent misunderstanding about what is happening to Anita proves mistaken, although it does highlight the mysterious atmosphere in Anita's house, where it remains likely that the girls are suffering from some form of abuse or neglect.



Meena's concern with her exam becomes a repeated motif throughout this entire episode. It highlights the way in which Meena's social circle represents an obstacle to her education and her advancement in life, as Anita and Sam only bring trouble.



After hearing Anita speak so much about sex, Meena now catches her in the act. Tracey's fear of sex reveals how little she actually understands about what is happening, but also suggests that she has been through traumatic experiences that have led her to associate sex with violence. Meena's thoughts about Sam show how strongly he has disappointed her with his racist comments. Sam's insulting attitude toward Anita also reveals a lack of gentleness between the two of them.



Sam's vulgar description of sex matches Anita, suggesting that they both enjoy taking part in emotion-less sexual acts—an aspect of English society that has fascinated Meena, but that her parents disapprove of. Tracey's attempt to fight her sister reveals that she is slowly growing to stand up for herself, even if, in this case, she does not actually understand what is going on.



Meena, who is still worrying about her **exam** the next day, is then terrified to hear Sam call out her name. He says he knows she is there and promises not to hurt her. Meena comes out of hiding, realizing that she gave Tracey her sweatshirt, and Sam asks her where she has been. When Meena ironically notes that he has not yet succeeded in driving her out, Sam seems surprised at her comment. He explains that he wrote nice notes to Meena, whereas Anita wrote mean ones because she is jealous of Sam and Meena's relationship.

Meena then realizes that Sam has a frustrated, confused attitude, which Meena recognizes from spending time with Anita, who always makes people feel weak. Meena realizes that Sam is a puppet who would never be courageous enough to extract himself from this situation. Meena then asks him about his words at the Fete, but Sam says he never meant to hurt Meena, arguing that his words were directed toward "the others." However, Meena then confronts him with what he did to the Indian bank manager and tells Sam that she *is* the others, and that he *did* mean her.

Suddenly, Sam grabs Meena's wrists and tells her that she has always been her favorite. He adds that Meena will always be able to move on, while he will be stuck in his situation. Then, he kisses her passionately, and Meena is glad to know that whenever he sees an Indian girl on the street, he will remember this moment and feel powerless. However, Anita then steps forward and throws a rock at Sam's face. Sam prepares to attack her back but Tracey intervenes, running toward Sam, who soon avoids her. Tracey then falls off the ledge into the pond. Anita immediately begins to panic, while Meena runs to get help—still obsessively remembering that she has an **exam** the next day.

In despair, Meena rings the doorbell at the front door of the **Big House**. When a small woman—who Meena assumes is a witch—answers the door, Meena is shocked to note how much she knows about Meena, such as her name and the location of her house. Meena tells the witch to call the police. The woman then calls out to "Arry," explaining that there has been an accident at the pond, as previously happened with Jodie Bagshot. Meena then sees an elegant man appear. He speaks to the woman, whom he calls Mireille, in Punjabi, and Meena cannot believe that the owner of the **Big House** is Indian.

Sam's interest in Meena seems sincere, but contrasts completely with his racist comments. The fact that Anita might be jealous of Meena puts Anita and Meena's relationship in perspective. Although Anita has so often been cruel and condescending toward Meena, it now appears that this might not be a sign of power, but proof of Anita's weakness and jealousy—an effort to humiliate someone she understands is actually stronger than her.



Although Meena still feels angry at Sam for his racist comments, she cannot help but feel compassion toward him as well. This allows her to realize that Sam might not as dangerous as he appears, but that he is weak and lets himself be manipulated by others. In addition, his ignorance of how his racist words might affect others proves that he has not put much thought into his actions, which derive from frustration and ignorance.



For the first time, Sam expresses a clear frustration at living in Tollington, showing resentment for the opportunities that Meena has to leave the village—and thus proving that he knows that Meena is superior to them in this way. Meena's joy at thinking that, from now on, Sam might associate all Indian girls with her suggests that one solution to personal racism is to foster close contact between members of separate communities. In this case, Meena hopes that Sam will project feelings of love and desire onto Indian people like her.



The fact that Mireille knows about Meena and that her husband is Indian is shocking, since it suggests that, all this time, some of the richest, most powerful members of the Tollington community have been foreigners and could have become Meena's family's friends. This brings new prestige to the situation of Indians in Tollington and suggests that Meena's community is not as vulnerable as it appears, since she benefits from the support of unexpected allies.



Mireille then makes Meena, who is showing signs of exhaustion and nervousness, sit in a study by the fire. Meena admires the house's rich furniture and beautiful decorations, feeling jealous about the enormous library on the walls. Meena notices the man's name, "Harinder P. Singh," on the typewriter and concludes that he is a Sikh, like Meena's mother. Meena feels completely exhausted, but listens as Mireille explains that she met 'Arry while she came from France to study at Cambridge. When Harinder's uncle died, leaving him money, they found this house and fell in love with it, finding Tollington a paradise. Meena thus concludes that this must have been a long time ago.

Mireille's monologue is then interrupted by Meena's mother frantically calling out for her daughter. When mama finally hugs her, looking both angry and desperate, she says that they found Tracey but that she was worried because the girl was wearing Meena's sweatshirt. Although Tracey was clinically dead when the ambulancemen found her, they were able to revive her at the hospital.

Over the next few days, this story soon becomes famous in the press, and reporters invade Tollington. Meena watches all this activity from her window. In emotional shock, Meena suffers from strong shaking. She feels furious, angry at Tracey, Anita, and Sam for making her life so unfairly complicated. She is also angry at herself for giving in to Tracey's demands and forgetting about her greater duty: passing the **eleven-plus**.

The next morning, Meena receives a letter from Anita asking her to meet with her about last night without talking to Sam. Meena tears the letter up. Her father, though, receives a letter from Harinder P. Singh, asking him to come to tea. Meena's parents cannot believe that an Indian man has lived in the **Big House** for so long.

When the police come to Meena's house that morning, after hordes of reporters have tried to talk to Meena's parents, Meena feels nervous. Meena's father tells her that Tracey is accusing either Sam or Anita of pushing her into the pond, and he asks Meena to tell the entire truth to the policemen. Meena feels the temptation to accuse either Sam or Anita, who have caused her so much pain.

Meena's mental agitation can be explained by the sudden, violent episodes she has witnessed, as well as her worries about her exam the next day. The contrast between Mireille and her husband's love of Tollington and the town's current state again highlights the fact that it makes more sense for Meena's family to leave than to stay, as the village has clearly lost its charm and peacefulness. Mr. Singh's similarity to Meena's mother only accentuates the mystery behind this couple's decision to remain isolated from village life.



The fact that Meena could have been Tracey is symbolic. It suggests that Meena's current situation is partly the result of luck—namely, the fact that Meena was born into a loving, supportive family, so different from Tracey and Anita's home situation.



Meena's anger at her former friends is, more generally, anger at the asphyxiating atmosphere of the Tollington community, which does not reward diversity and ambition, but encourages young people to focus on narrow goals. Meena's effort to succeed in school reflects her determination to prove better than her community.



Meena's decision not to speak to Anita proves that she is finally ready to sever ties once and for all. With regard to Mr. Singh, it remains uncertain why his wife and he would have chosen to live on their own for so long, with no contact with the outside world.



Meena finds herself forced to make a moral decision. Although she has lied a lot in the past, she also knows from experience with Baby and Pinky that falsely accusing others ultimately leads her to feel guilt and shame. The decision she is about to make will prove whether or not she has truly changed and learned from her mistakes.



When Meena remembers that the pain she felt for Nanima and Robert was much more intense than any emotion Sam or Anita made her feel, she gives up on her idea of seeking revenge. She tells the policemen the truth, explaining that Tracey fell into the pond by accident. The policemen are surprised by this admission, and Meena concludes that they were probably looking forward to locking up Sam, who already has a long criminal record, and Anita, who was clearly bound to have a child early and be a burden to the state. Meena concludes that her best option is to leave them to themselves and hope that they might change.

The next day, Meena takes the **eleven-plus** in her headmaster's office. When she goes home, she sees her father setting up a "For Sale" sign in their front yard. Meena jokes that the exam went okay, but not well enough to immediately sell the house. However, papa makes a gesture that indicates he discussed property matters with Mr. Singh. Mama then explains that Mr. Singh, who owns the entire field across from Meena's house, will soon turn it into houses. Meena wonders if Mr. Singh too is going to move as well, but her parents don't know. Papa then hands mama a **necklace** and mama is shocked to see that it is the diamond necklace she thought she had lost. Papa encourages her not to ask questions and simply accept that it has returned.

From Tollington, the Kumars invite only Mrs. Worrall to their farewell party. Auntie Shaila gives them a metal "OM" to hang on their door, saying that they are now moving to a pleasant neighborhood, where half of their neighbors will be Hindu. She gives Meena a beautiful pen with a note explaining that Meena will need it at her grammar school. Meena uses it that night to write a note to Anita, saying that she is moving in the next few days and will attend the grammar school, but, as Meena expected, Anita never replies.

When Meena realizes that she cares much more about other people than about Sam and Anita, she concludes that seeking revenge on them would be petty and illogical, and that it is much more useful to invest her energy in other aspects of life. Her decision to tell the truth reveals that she has reached the capacity to make moral decisions in a mature way. The policemen's disregard for Anita and Sam suggests that these youths are symbolic of the community's ills and of the difficulty of escaping stifling environments.



As Meena's parents prepare to leave Tollington, it becomes apparent that the entire community is about to expand and change dramatically, although it remains ambiguous whether these changes are for the better or for the worse. Papa's advice to not ask too many questions about the necklace implies that he knows Meena has something to do with it, but forgetting and forgiving is sometimes the best strategy, so that one can focus on moving forward and leading a better life—which Meena and her entire family are in the process of doing.



The fact that Mrs. Worrall is the only Tollington villager invited to the party reveals how little sincere, deep contact the Kumars have had with anyone else in the village. In a similar way, Meena receives confirmation that Anita is never going to be ready to take part in a sincere, mutual relationship. Meena is thus free to move on, leaving the negative aspects of life in Tollington behind and using her new self-confidence to begin a new life somewhere else.





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