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<https://doi.org/10.25959/23211515.v1>

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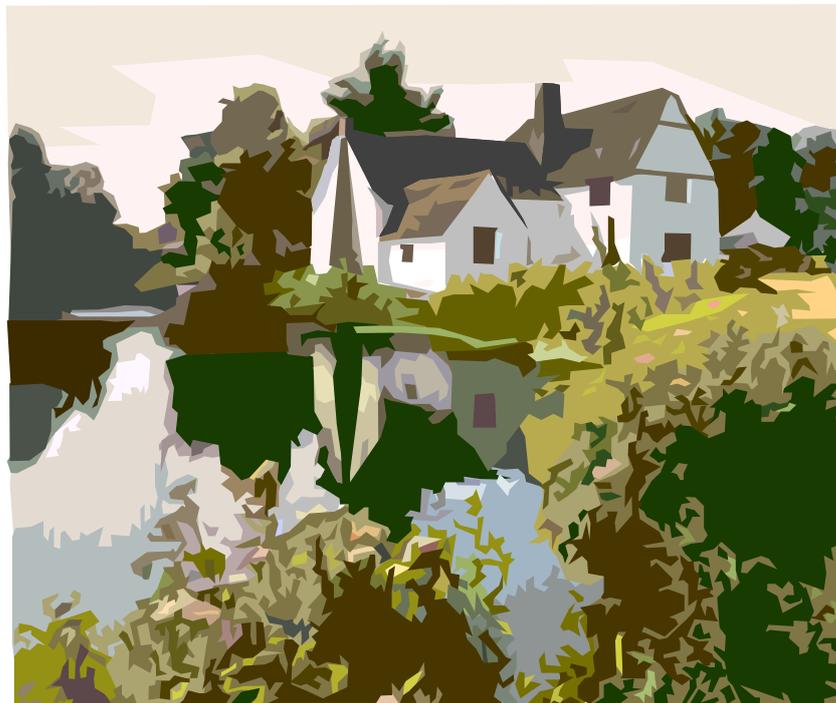
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Being and Longing in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*
Sophie Alexander, BA (Hons.)



Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English
School of English, Journalism, and European Languages
University of Tasmania
July 2010

I certify that this thesis is original work, except as indicated and acknowledged, and that I have not submitted it for any other award.

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Abstract

Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) is a seemingly inconsequential novel about a British-Asian child who undertakes a voyage of social education in the English Midlands in the late 1960s. However, this thesis relates the novel to a broader context inside and outside the textual world in the aftermath of Indian independence and Partition in August, 1947. It conducts a socio-historical analysis to trace the parallel narratives of the protagonist, Meena Kumar, and her communities of residence and inheritance. The dissertation draws upon postcolonial theory to analyse the continuing repercussions of Indian colonisation both in the text and in external British society. Approaching *Anita and Me* as a Black British *Bildungsroman* provides a framework to unite these multiple threads of individual and social development.

The thesis views the novel as a performative artefact which represents the transformation of Britain from an imperial power to a post-imperial society, at the same time as actively contributing to this transformation as an element of public culture. Meena's journey of self-determination entails a partial decolonisation of her mind, juxtaposed with national identities which preserve an imperial worldview. The dissertation explores the contradictions of human relationships and the often ambivalent aversion to, and yet desire for, racialised others. A central focus is the troubled friendship between Meena and the character

of Anita Rutter. The thesis accentuates the semi-autobiographical nature of the text as a form of fictional “mythology” (Syal 10) for imagining personal connections to historical moments.

The three chapters examine Syal’s *Bildungsroman* from alternative perspectives. The opening chapter explores interactions between class and race; the desire for belonging; the development of personal identifications in conjunction with national imaginaries; and the complexities of post-imperial racism. The second chapter considers the phenomenon of diaspora; the Partition of India; and the association between memory, history, and narratives. In the concluding chapter, the meanings of family and the “homely” and the “unhomely” are analysed. These interlinked sections emphasise the novel’s representation of the combined effects of class inequalities, historically engrained racial anxiety, and racialised visions of the overlapping English and British nations.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the contribution of various influences and conversations to a project which was rewarding, challenging, and frustrating at times.

Firstly, I am immensely grateful for having two marvellous supervisors who offered encouragement, incisive criticism, and discerning comments and suggestions. They firmly, yet gently, urged an initially reluctant student to engage in more writing and less researching (or “productive procrastination”). Much gratitude to Anna and Ralph for generously devoting time and energy, and for guiding the ship and then entrusting this student with the steering at just the right moments.

The entire experience was made more enjoyable by the supportive and talented postgraduate “ejellies” at the UTAS School of English, Journalism, and European Languages (SEJEL). Our discussions are always entertaining and intellectually invigorating and some of you have become treasured friends.

I also acknowledge the SEJEL Graduate Coordinators, Dr Anna Johnston, Dr Elle Leane, and Dr Nicola Goc, for providing enriching postgraduate programs and valuable advice. In addition, the thesis would have been impossible to complete without the professional and friendly service of UTAS librarians. I am also most thankful for the financial support of an

Australian Postgraduate Award, administered by the Graduate Research Office, which allowed more time to concentrate on the intense demands of full-time study.

With thanks to my caring human and furry families and spectacular friends. And finally, I dedicate this project to the memory of those who have departed to a more peaceful place.

~

“What does Christopher Robin do in the mornings? He learns. He becomes Educated. He instigates – I *think* that is the word he mentioned, but I may be referring to something else – he instigates Knowledge.”

Eeyore, *The House at Pooh Corner*

A.A. Milne

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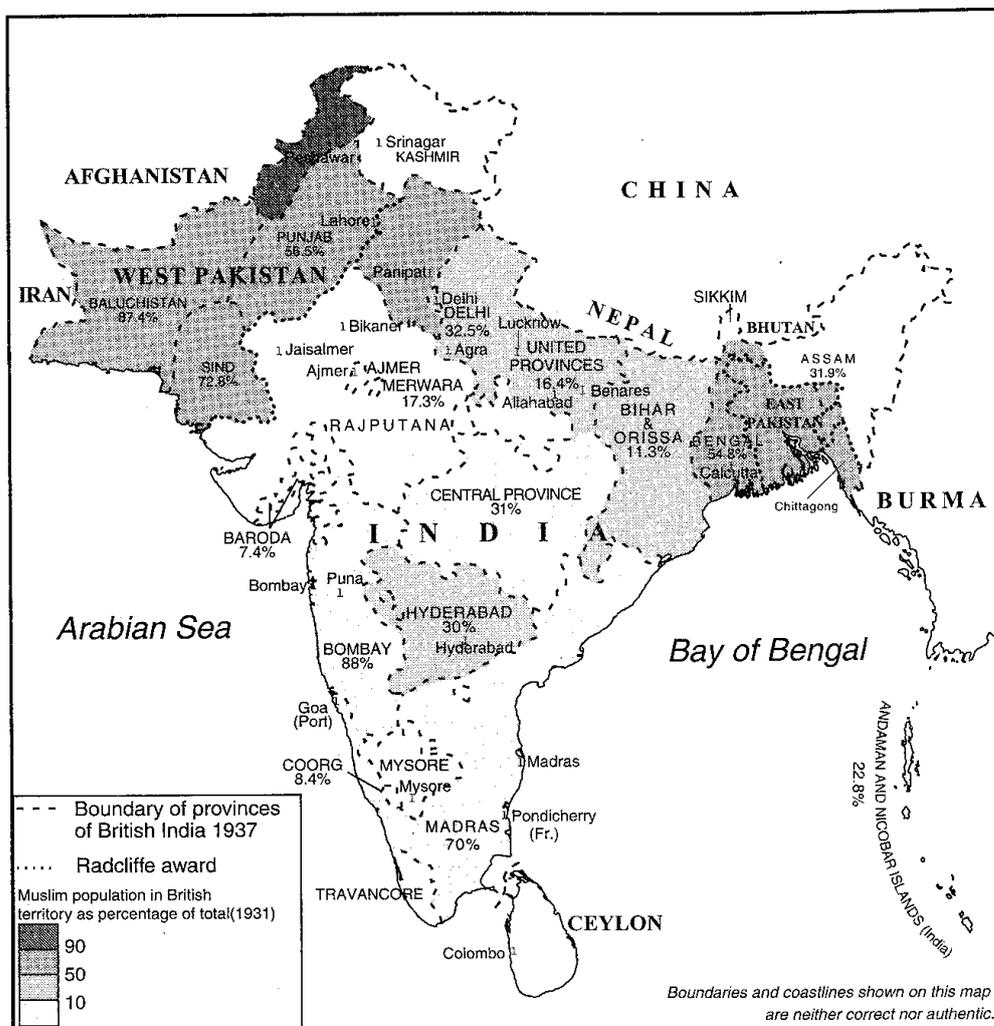


Fig. 1. Map of Indian Partition from Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2000) 4.

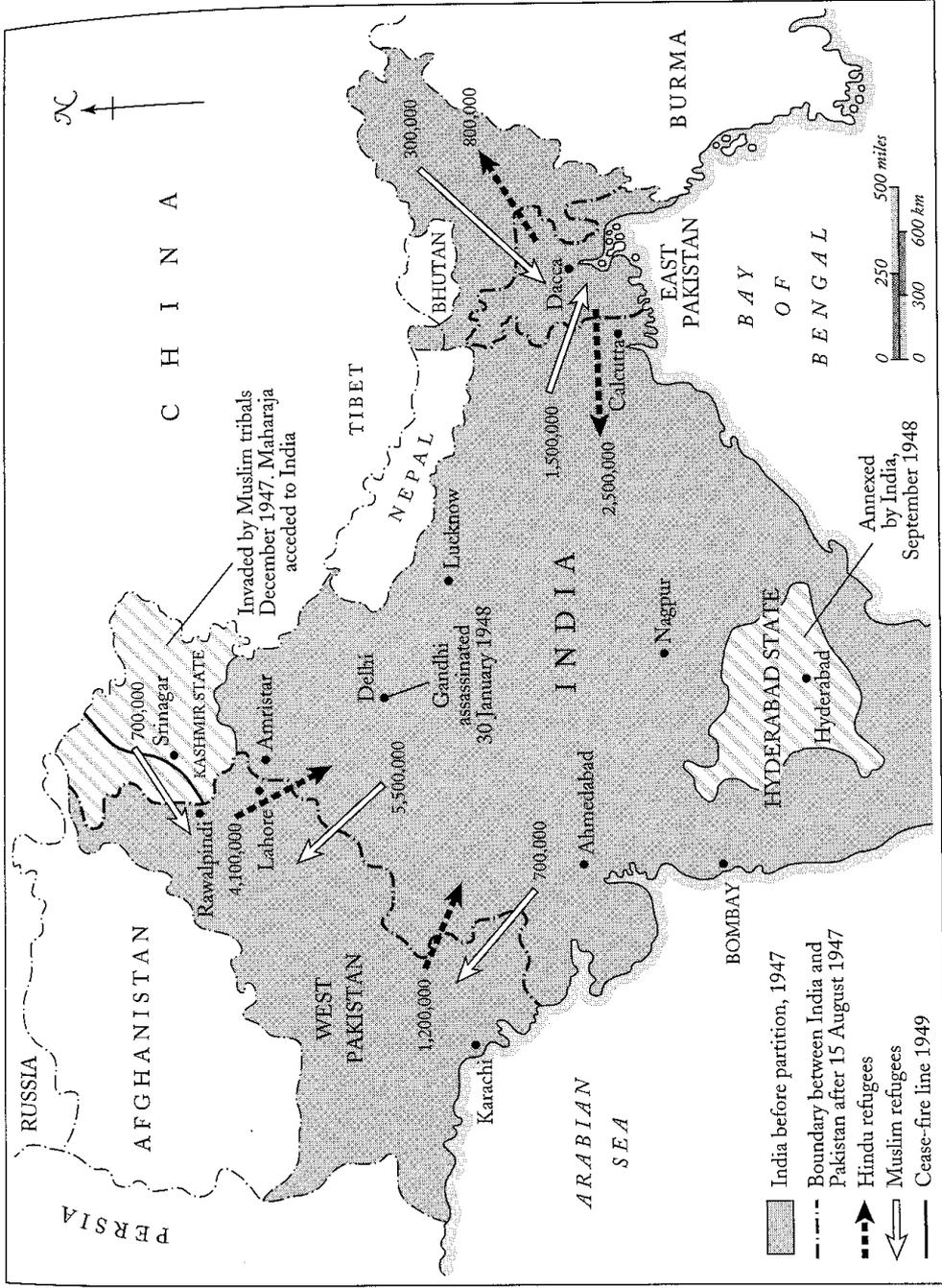


Fig. 2. Map of Partition refugee movements from Ian Copland, *India 1885-1947: The Unmaking of an Empire* (Harlow: Longman-Pearson, 2001) xv.

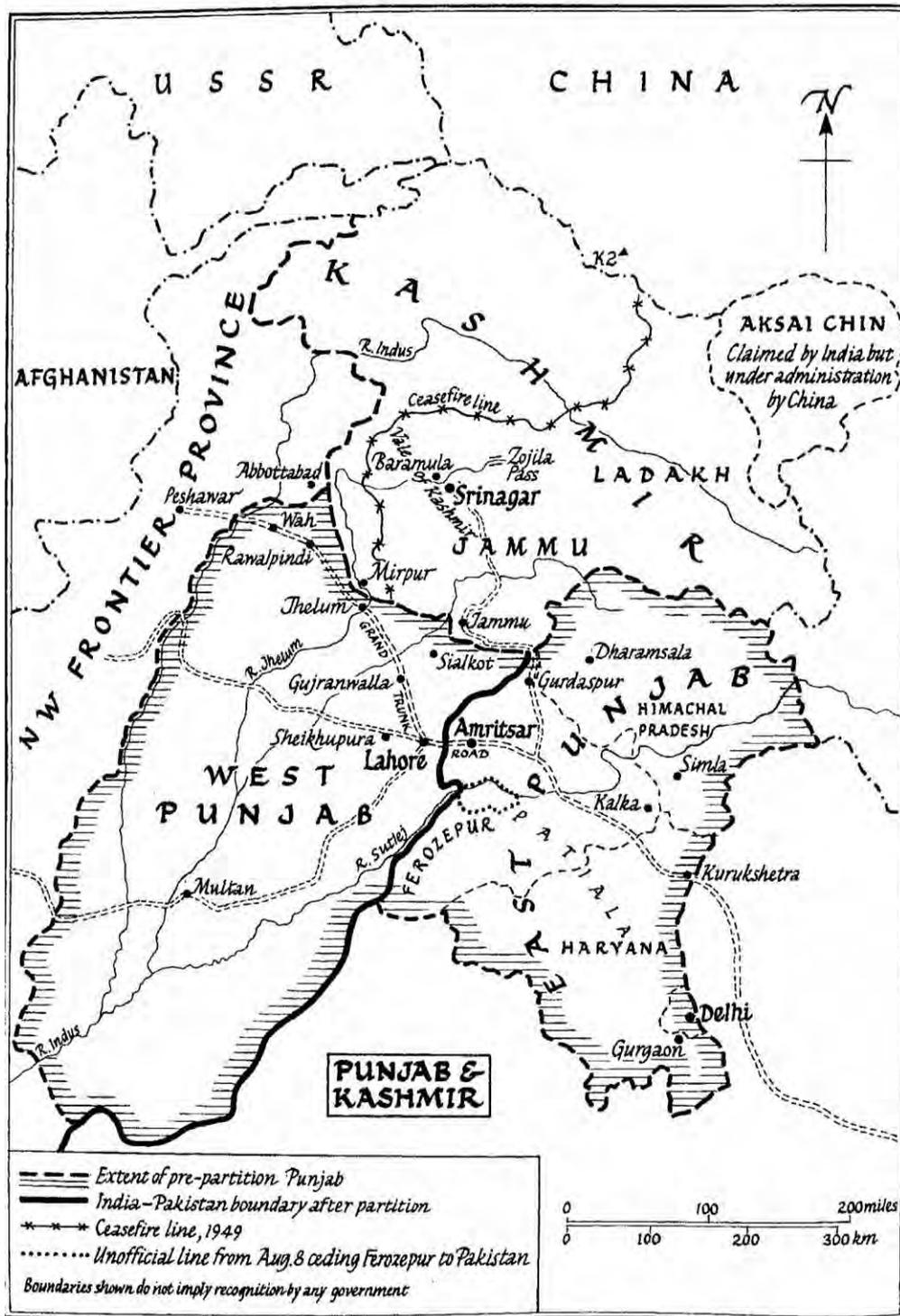


Fig. 3. Map of partitioned Punjab from Alex von Tunzelmann, *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2007) xvi.