

TEACHERS' NOTES

Brought to you from Film Education and Icon Film Distribution, this resource can be used to teach PSHE and Citizenship, Literacy, English and Media Studies at Key Stages 3 and 4. Each activity is inspired by the film *Anita and Me* based on the original book by Meera Syal.

You will find that a class trip to see the film will enhance the students understanding of the themes and issues of each activity. Some cinema managers are willing to offer school screenings at a reduced rate. Contact your local cinema manager for more details.

The objectives of this study guide are to:

- Introduce students to the film *Anita and Me* and to the original novel by Meera Syal.
- Teach students about respecting differences between people, about the effects of all types of stereotyping, prejudice, bullying, racism and discrimination and finally to consider social and moral dilemmas.
- Take advantage of students' enthusiasm for the medium of film to promote creativity in the classroom and at the cinema.

FILM SYNOPSIS

Meena (Chandeep Uppal) is twelve years old and lives in the village of Tollington 'the jewel of the Black Country'. The year is 1972. She is the daughter of Indian parents who have come to England to give her a better life. Her idyllic adolescence, surrounded by eccentric relatives and friends, is disrupted by the arrival in Tollington of Anita Rutter (Anna Brewster) and her dysfunctional family. At fourteen - blonde, aloof, beautiful, outrageous and sassy - Anita is everything Meena thinks she wants to be. Meena wheedles her way into Anita's life, but the arrival of a baby brother, teenage hormones, impending entrance exams for the posh grammar school and a motor cycling rebel without a future, threaten to turn her salad days sour. *Anita and Me* paints a comic, poignant, compassionate and colourful portrait of village life in the era of flares, glam rock and Jackie magazine.

anita & me

Director	Metin Hüseyin
UK release date	22nd November 2002
Running time	92 mins
Certificate	12A <i>[contains moderate language, violence and sex references]</i>



How Do We Define Ourselves?



The year is 1972. Meena is twelve years old and lives in the village of Tollington 'the jewel of the Black Country', the daughter of Indian parents who have come to England to give her a better life. Surrounded by eccentric relatives and friends, her adolescence is idyllic. Meena wants to belong: she wants to be part of a group. Some groups she belongs to by birth, location etc., some groups she belongs to are as a result of her own choice.

- FAMILY
- FRIENDS
- CLASSMATES
- EXTENDED FAMILY
- NEIGHBOURS
- 'UNCLE' ALAN'S CHURCH
- THE WENCHES
- GRAMMAR SCHOOL PUPILS
- READERS OF JACKIE MAGAZINE
- VILLAGERS
- WIDER IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

Meera Syal, writer, co-producer, actress who plays Auntie Sheila, remarks 'I wanted to capture a part of English life that is gone. For the children, the first generation born and growing up here, the whole home-based social life was Indian, but outside the house you were completely different - switching accents and persona to be like your friends. I look objectively at both communities. What you need to find are connections between individuals. If you judge people in groups you are not understanding humanity.'

A series of possible suggestions for some of the groups that Meena belongs to is shown left.

Discuss which groups Meena is in by a) definition and b) choice. Draw a diagram, on a separate sheet of paper, which shows Meena at the centre, and the groups that she belongs to by definition on the left, with those she belongs to by choice on the right. Do any of the groups overlap?

- * Why does Meena feel so isolated at times?
- * Are the groups compatible?

TASK

Discuss Meera Syal's comment that 'if you judge people in groups you are not understanding humanity'. What does she mean by this? Do you agree with her? Explain your answers.

Anita and Me is about that time in people's lives when there is a pull between reality and expectation; hopes and dreams. This guide looks at how the filmmakers have explored this very difficult and important time set against the equally difficult background of racial prejudice.



EXTENSION TASK

What would your group chart look like? Can you think of anyone else whose chart would be similar, if not the same, as yours? Why would that be?



Anita and Me - An Autobiography?

Meera Syal explains, 'I wrote the book as an homage to my own generation, the first generation of Indians to be born and grow up in Britain – life was painful and funny and joyful. The story is mainly fiction, but the setting is autobiographical and some of the characters are amalgams of people I knew, particularly the girls I wanted to emulate.'

'When I wrote the book, I wanted to record something of my extraordinary childhood, growing up in a Black Country village. Most Indian immigrants lived in the cities or the suburbs, and only mixed with other Indians. It was unusual to be in such a rural community, which was still feudal in many ways, where they were not aware of other cultures. My parents' generation were often portrayed as simple illiterate peasants, whereas many were university graduates who would have been at home in any big city in the world. Looking back I see that generation as pioneers.'

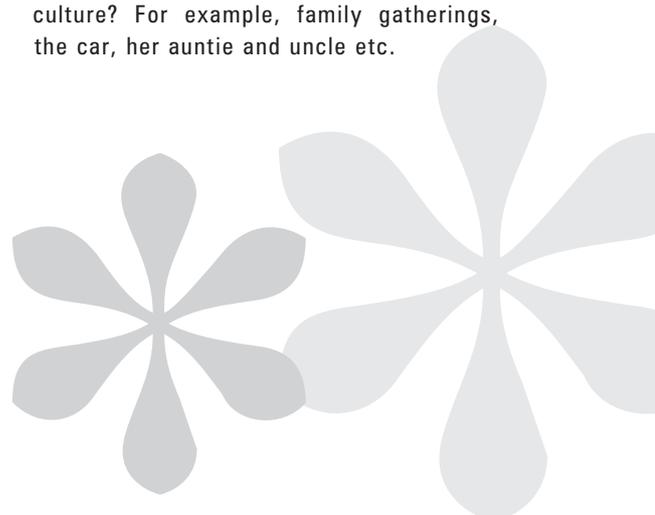
- * Having read Meera Syal's comments on the book why do you think the heroine is called Meena? Why is the title *Anita and Me*?

USING HUMOUR FOR EFFECT

In the synopsis for the film the filmmakers describe *Anita and Me* as painting 'a comic, poignant, compassionate and colourful portrait of village life in the era of flares, glam rock and Jackie magazine.' The humour is mainly generated by Meena's innocence of the situations in which she finds herself. She is a twelve-year-old girl wanting to be older. Her family treat her as a little girl; her friends expect her to be as mature and rebellious as they are. This conflict and tension are evident in her narration.

Because Meera Syal is observing other people through the eyes of a child she is able to comment upon very serious situations in a comic way. Meena's innocence allows her to ask questions about subjects upon which other characters do not comment.

- * How does Meena observe her own culture? For example, family gatherings, the car, her auntie and uncle etc.





Humour and the Themes of the Film

RACISM

Meena's family are the only Indian immigrants in the village.

Of his character Sanjeev Bhaskar, says, *'I think Papa is very typical of his generation - highly educated but having to take more menial or mediocre jobs in order to survive in a new country. He dotes on his family, and has chosen to avoid the big city, where most Asians have set up home, so that he is regarded as odd by both the English and the Indians. Meena's parents want to hang on to her; they don't want her to grow up too quickly; and they are incredibly protective because they don't understand their surroundings themselves. They are from a generation who had their own dreams crushed to give their family a better life in another country.'* he explains. *'They were an aspirant minority, and it's the next generation, our generation, who have the confidence to emerge as observers of our own culture as actors, writers or comedians.'*

Meera Syal comments on Auntie Shaila. *'She's a typical bossy auntie who thinks she is quite sophisticated. Away from home and family, our parents' families could feel quite isolated, and formed close friendships with other couples that the children called uncles and aunties out of respect. Auntie Shaila doesn't understand why her friends have chosen to live in the countryside. They have come to England for a more urbane lifestyle, so why have they chosen to go backwards? That's what happened to my parents. My mother was a country girl, so my parents decided not to live in an industrial area.'*

Here is Lynne Redgrave's description of Mrs Ormerod, the village shopkeeper. *'Mrs Ormerod sees herself as the conscience of the village. In an age when the idea of alternative lifestyle didn't exist, she sees high heels as the work of the devil, and thoroughly disapproves of Uncle Alan the hippy vicar, who is trying to spread love and peace. Mrs Ormerod thinks she has seen the world, just because she has been to Brighton to visit her daughter. But she has a heart of gold.'*

Mark Williams, who plays the vicar says, *'He's of his time, philosophically; trying to come to terms with racism and sexism in a naive way - the worst bits of the hippy times melded together. I decided to give him a back story as a recovering alcoholic.'*

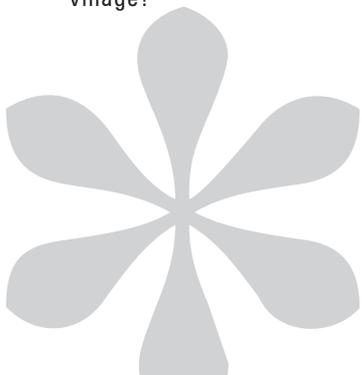
Part of the humour of the film is the irony that, at a time of obvious racism against Indian immigrants, India becomes a source of inspiration for spirituality, music and fashion. Pop stars went to India to speak to gurus, fashion designers began to use Indian fabrics and accessories and Indian artists such as Ravi Shankar brought Indian music to the West.

Meera and Metin Hüseyin (the director) haven't shied away from showing how prejudiced people were then; they haven't tried to make it politically correct for a modern audience.

* Do you think that people are still prejudiced? Write about your family and the people in your community in terms of their views in racism. What are your views?

- * How does Meena view her father and mother?
- * Why does she get on so well with her grandmother?
- * Why does she not realise about the racism around her?
- * How does Anita behave when she comes to tea?
- * How does Mrs Ormerod, the shopkeeper, treat Meena?

- * What is the Vicar's attitude to racism?
- * Where does the Vicar go at the end of the film? Ironically, who replaces him?
- * How does the Indian family talk about the rest of the village?



Maturity, Responsibility, Love and Relationships

Meena's family are trying to keep her as a little girl for as long as possible; Meena's friends are acting well beyond their years. This makes the contrast between Anita and Meena even stronger.

TASK

Look at these incidents from the film. How do the girls and their families/ the villagers react to them?

- Hairy Neddy, the singer and his affair with Sandy the divorcee
- Going to the Fair and the Wenches going off with the Fairground boys
- Anita's mum, Deirdre, leaving home
- The birth of Meena's younger brother
- Shoplifting
- The racist attack on Mr Bhatra, the engineer
- What the girls can watch on television
- The den they make in the gardens of the Big House



TASK

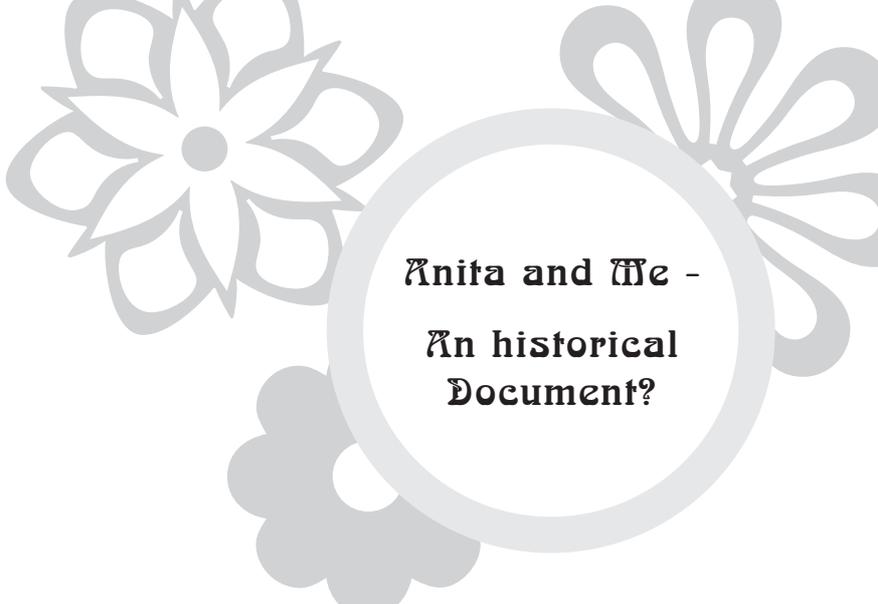
Meena is a writer and keeps a diary of all the events in the film so that we see Anita through her eyes. What would Anita write about Meena if she kept a diary?

TASK

The Wenches read Jackie magazine. They think it is more important than anything else. If you were writing the agony column of Jackie what advice would you give the two girls?

TASK

Meena and Anita go their separate ways. Meena has the possibility of becoming someone like Meera Syal. What do you think happens to Anita? Describe the sort of person you think she will become. For example, where will she live? What kind of job will she find herself doing?



Anita and Me - An historical Document?

The seventies were a time of great upheaval. The traditional industrial base of this country was beginning to break up. This had an effect on whole communities which may have been founded on one industry. Radical changes were happening in employment, fashion, mass media and communications. Even the currency had just undergone decimalisation. The filmmakers have to capture this in a short space of time.

The first time Meera's mother came to watch the filming she cried because she recognised so many things from that period of her life.

The early seventies was a time of great change in communities like the fictional Tollington, when the men were losing their jobs, and the women were being forced to go out to work. It was a time of economic depression.

REPRESENTATION

How have the filmmakers captured the style of the period through the visual representation of the characters? Look at the following images.



- * Does the image match with the character?
- * How specific are they to the seventies?
- * Is it just the character or the visual context of the village of Tollington?
- * Why do you think the film was shot in the East Midlands and not in the location in which the book is set?



EXTENSION TASK

If you were making a film to capture the spirit of the age in which you live, which images would you want to include in it?