



# Themes

- **What are the novel's main themes?**
- **What do they add to the novel?**
- **How do themes work?**
- **What do you learn about Meera Syal's attitude to life from the themes she explores in *Anita and Me*?**

A theme is an idea, or a set of ideas, threaded through a piece of writing. Think of *Anita and Me* as a piece of multi-coloured fabric. A theme is a single-coloured thread — red, blue, yellow and so on. Each thread is woven into the whole as part of the pattern. It mixes with the other colours that it crosses to make shapes or new colours. All the threads overlap. In the same way, Meera Syal weaves her ideas about family life, growing up, or relationships between races into the story that she is telling.

When we discuss a theme, it is as if we are pulling out a single thread from the novel's overall pattern. We can look at it on its own and then weave it back into the whole. The themes in *Anita and Me* that we will consider here are:

- racism
- family
- friendship
- growing up
- education
- social change

Lesser, but related, themes include:

- religious attitudes
- tolerance
- bigotry
- sex
- the significance of food

Remember these three points as you think about the themes in this novel:

- 1 No theme in a novel is completely separate from any other. They all overlap. That is what makes a text such as *Anita and Me* feel complete.
- 2 Similar themes are often discussed using different names. For example, friendship is close to attachment, comradeship or close relationship, and learning is close to education. Do not get too carried away in compiling long, repetitive lists of themes.

- 3 Some themes feature more regularly than others in the pattern of the novel.

## Racism

The Kumars regard themselves as the only Asian family in Tollington because, until the end of the novel, no one knows anything about Mr Singh at the Big House. Most of the villagers treat them as an exotic novelty — look, for example, at the way the Ballbearings women approach Nanima (pp. 219–20) — and no direct racism is targeted at them.

Nonetheless the Kumars are culturally very different from the other inhabitants of Tollington. There is a certain amount of mutual respect between adults — Mrs Kumar and Mrs Worrall often help each other, for example, and Mr Kumar gets on well with Uncle Alan (p. 179) and allows Meena to take part in church activities. On the other hand, the adult Kumars do not mix socially with non-Indian people in the way that Meena does with the other children. Interestingly, her parents seem quite happy for her to do this, unlike Auntie Shaila, for example, who keeps her daughters Pinky and Baby under very close supervision.

When Meena encounters or hears about racism she is upset because she does not really understand it. Syal threads a number of incidents through the novel to make it clear that racism — something the author clearly cares about — is very real and it was never far away from an Indian family, such as the fictional Kumars, in a 1970s village like Tollington.

Syal includes the following incidents, some quite minor and some crucial to the plot, to make Meena's (second-hand) experience of, and thoughts about, racism clear:

- hospital nurse's patronising comment about pain to Mrs Kumar during Sunil's birth (p. 132)
- the Rutters' dog being named 'Nigger' (pp. 89–90 and 235)
- Auntie Usha being attacked (and raped?) by white thugs in the city (pp. 173 and 311)
- car driver's vicious 'wog' comment and Meena's reaction to it (p. 97)
- Mrs Goodyear, the regular fortune teller, and her unthinking, stereotypical (mildly racist?) views about Meena's background and future (p. 183)

### Pause for thought

When we talk or write about racism, we usually mean native people being intolerant towards immigrants, typically with different colour skins. But can it work in reverse? Are the Indian adults in *Anita and Me* sometimes (mildly) racist in their own attitudes? Mrs Kumar several times privately criticises English people (pp. 58–59 and 90). Or look at Auntie Shaila rudely 'closing ranks' against Mrs Worrall when their neighbour offers to help Mr Kumar and Meena while Mrs Kumar is in hospital (p. 130).

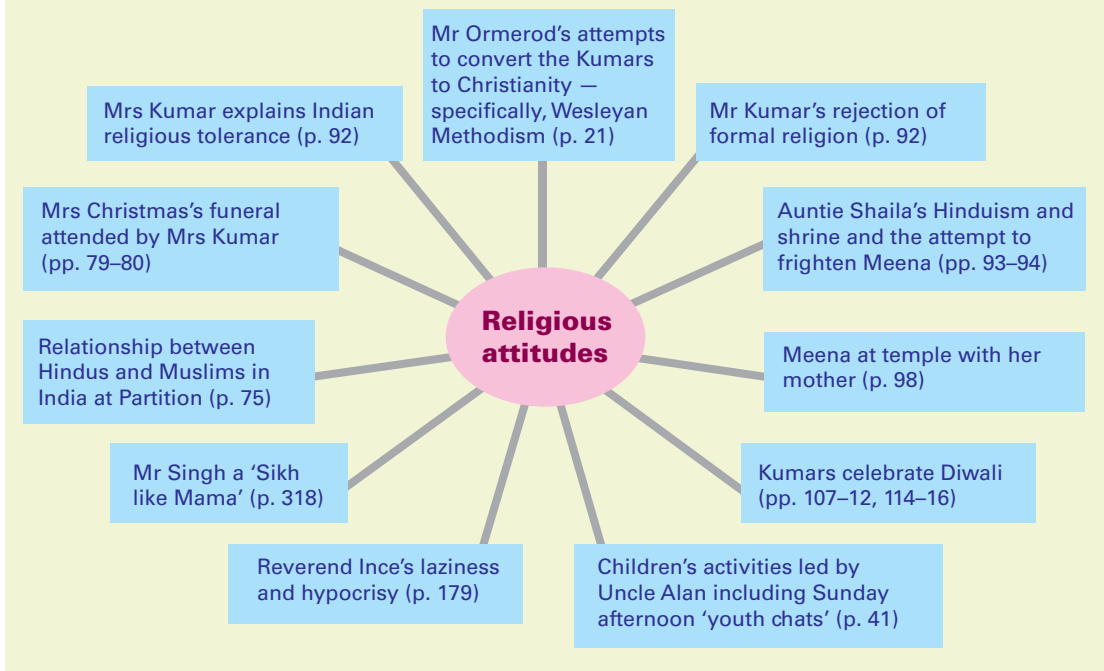


- Sam Lowbridge's loud racist heckling at the fête (pp. 193 and 273)
- Mr Ormerod's 'barely disguised amusement' when he sees Nanima in his shop (p. 223)
- the racist attack on the 'bank manager' led by Sam Lowbridge and watched with pleasure by Anita (pp. 275 and 277)

Sam Lowbridge sums up a very common attitude when he defends his general racism by declaring, 'I never meant you Meena! It was all the others, not you!' (p. 313) to which Meena, now much more mature than at the beginning of the novel, tellingly replies, 'I *am* the others, Sam. You did mean me.'

## Grade **booster**

Construct spider diagrams as a way of making notes and organising your thoughts about themes. Make sure that you note exactly where in *Anita and Me* your references come from. Here is an example:



## Family

Because *Anita and Me* is told entirely from Meena's point of view, hers is the only family Syal lets us see at first hand. All the others are observed and described by Meena as an outsider. The Kumars therefore become the family with which Meena and the reader compare all the other families in the novel. Syal is inviting us to think about different models of family life and to draw our own conclusions.



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The Kumars are a tightly united (except for Meena's rebellious thoughts and behaviour) nuclear family consisting of married mother, father and, eventually, two children. None of the non-Indian families mentioned in the novel have this traditional pattern — or, if one has, it soon breaks. Deirdre Rutter, for example, leaves her husband and two daughters and moves out to live with another man (p. 246).

**Family is an important theme in *Anita and Me***

Other non-traditional families in Tollington include Sandy (a divorcee with a child), who marries Hairy Neddy while Meena is in hospital. Mrs Lowbridge is a single mother. The Mad Mitchells are a married partnership but there are obviously problems and in the end (also during Meena's hospital stay) their mentally impaired daughter Cara is taken from them. Mrs Worrall and Mr Christmas are older and caring at home for very sick spouses, so they are no longer nuclear family units either. Uncle Alan seems to be single.

On the other hand, Meena's Indian aunts and uncles all live in married partnerships with children, although she senses that, in most cases, these marriages have lost their gloss and become practical rather than romantic arrangements. Her own parents are different. They have a marriage that still seems fresh and they have a private intimacy that excludes their children.



We also hear about the extended family which the Kumars have left behind in India — the paternal grandparents Dadaji and Dadima, and Meena’s mother’s family, Nanaji and Nanima (p. 81) — whom Meena knows only from photographs until she meets Nanima in the flesh when her grandmother arrives for an extended visit (p. 199).

Mr and Mrs Kumar also have blood siblings in India as opposed to the group of Indian friends living in Britain, whom they regard as brothers and sisters — the ‘aunties and uncles’.

Although extended family members are geographically a long way away, their existence is part of the Kumar family’s stability. Local non-Indian families do not have this network. Mrs Worrall, for example, hardly sees, and has very little to do with, her children and grandchildren, although they live only a few miles away (p. 58). Syal is making us aware that Indian family values are often different from British ones.

**Key quotation**

**‘I can’t cope any more, Shyam. Back home I would have sisters, mothers, servants...’**

(Mrs Kumar, p. 196)

**Key quotation**

**It struck me suddenly how mama and papa had somehow managed to retain something I did not see in most of the Aunties’ and Uncles’ marriages, an openness, a flirty banter which both fascinated and embarrassed me.**

(Meena, p. 83)

**Key quotation**

**What I did not understand was why this yearning had not worn off yet. Other parents did not behave like they did; if any of the Uncles attempted to put their arms round their wives in public, this always provoked a chorus of shrieks and mock-naughty-boy slaps from the Aunties.**

(Meena, p. 84)

**Grade focus**



How does Syal use food and meals to make the reader aware of cultural differences?

Grades A*–C points	Grades D–G points
1 The Kumars eat mostly traditional Indian food cooked from raw ingredients, which occupies a lot of Mrs Kumar’s time and energy and irritates Meena, who would usually prefer to eat ‘junk’ food like the other children in Tollington. Syal uses this to show us how different the Kumars are.	1 The Kumars eat Indian food but other people in Tollington prefer things like fishfingers.
2 It is the custom for Tollington families to invite in for meals all the children with whom their own children are playing. Deirdre Rutter deliberately does not invite Meena for fishfingers with Anita and Tracey, which is a thoughtless and unkind way of excluding her and may also be Syal’s way of showing us an instance of casual racism (p. 54).	2 Anita’s mother does not invite Meena to tea, which upsets her.
3 When Anita, very unusually, eats a meal with the Kumars (pp. 252–55). Syal gives us a glimpse of the Kumars at home from Anita’s point of view with an uncomfortable Meena in the middle. Fortunately, given Anita’s wariness about mattar-paneer and chicken curry, presented with humour by Syal, ‘Mama had gone to the trouble of preparing two menus.’	3 Anita doesn’t like Indian food, so Mrs Kumar gives her fishfingers and chips.

## Friendship

Meena refers to Anita as ‘me friend’ (p. 186) to which the very perceptive fortune teller replies: ‘Is that what you think she is darlink?’ Anita and Meena are never really friends and the two years that the novel covers allow Meena, gradually, to realise that.

Meena looks up to the older ‘brassy’ Anita, partly because she is so very different from anyone in Meena’s family background. Syal uses the stereotypical daughters of Indian immigrants, Pinky and Baby, one a year older and one a year younger than Meena, to make this difference very clear. Look at the incident when they are in Mr Ormerod’s shop with Meena and Anita (Chapter 6) for the best example of this in *Anita and Me*.

Anita is, in her own way, fascinated by Meena — for example, when she wants to steal her Indian clothes (p. 256) — and is drawn to her. That is why she ‘collects’ her from the Kumars’ back step in the first place (p. 38). She is also, perhaps without realising it, deeply jealous of Meena’s caring and stable family, which is so unlike her own dysfunctional one.

On the other hand, Syal shows us that Anita has none of the empathy which goes with friendship. She uses Meena when it suits her and never does anything kind for her. She fails to contact Meena in hospital, for instance, and does not get in touch after she leaves the village. In fact, when Meena tries to show affectionate kindness to Anita after Deirdre’s departure, Anita rejects it angrily (p. 247). After Tracey’s near drowning, Anita can think only of getting herself out of trouble, which is her sole reason for writing Meena a note (p. 322).

Syal invites us to think about friendship by comparing other relationships in the novel with the flawed friendship which lies at its heart. Mr and Mrs Kumar’s closest friends, for example, are Auntie Shaila and Uncle Amman, and when the latter is taken ill (p. 306), Meena’s parents go to the hospital to support his wife.

Mrs Kumar and Mrs Worrall are also the model of good friendly neighbourliness too.

Meena eventually finds a true friend of her own in Robert who — with his mature, gentle intelligence — could not be more different from Anita. In Chapter 12, Syal shows them gradually getting to know each other, joking and each understanding something of what the other is feeling. When Robert’s death puts an end to this, Meena is very upset and grieves for months.

### Key quotation

**I had lost my best friend to someone who could have been a friend and lost himself, and between them, they had caused me what I thought was agonizing pain, until I met two other people, Nanima and Robert, who had thrown all previous self-pity into stark relief.**

(Meena, p. 324)



### Pause for thought

How would you define 'good friendship' and what do you learn about Meera Syal's attitude to it from *Anita and Me*?



On another level, Syal also invites us to compare Meena's 'friendship' with Anita to Meena's relationship with Sam. He has always admired Meena and never been casually cruel to her, as he is to almost everyone else. 'Yow've always been the best wench in Tollington,' he finally tells Meena (p. 314), leaving her sad in the knowledge that he and she could never really be friends.

### Grade **booster**

Make a list of all the examples in the novel of pairs of people who could be said to be friends. Beside each, write whether you think the 'friendship' is weak, strong or somewhere in between, with a page reference for each so that you have recorded your textual evidence. Include pairings such as Tracey and Meena; Fat Sally and Anita; Sam and Anita.



## Growing up

Meena is nine when the novel opens and eleven when it ends. By then she is leaving Tollington and going off to a new life in a better house with new neighbours, who will be mostly professional people like her parents, and a good education at the girls' grammar school. In every sense, she is leaving Anita behind.

During those two years, she grows from a child who wantonly steals and lies to a much more mature young woman who has had a serious accident and a lot of time to think while in hospital, as well as some developmental experiences with Tollington children. In a sense, the whole novel is about Meena growing up.

Syal presents Meena's knowing and observing Anita and eventually learning to detach herself as a crucial part of her growing up.

Other people who grow up, or at least move on and/or make new beginnings during the course of the novel, include:

- Sherrie, whose family moves away to the Lake District
- Fat Sally, who is going to a private Catholic secondary school
- Hairy Neddy, who marries Sandy, gives up his band and takes a job

Anita, meanwhile and in another sense, grows up too — although there is no new beginning for her. She loses her virginity to Sam Lowbridge and becomes ever coarser and harder for most people in the novel to like, but at the end of the novel she remains in Tollington, where her future is distinctly unpromising.

### Grade **booster**

Work out how far Syal wants the reader to sympathise with Anita at the end of the novel. Discuss it with a partner and make sure you have textual evidence (note the page numbers carefully when you have found your references) to support your points.



### Pause for thought

When Meena is in hospital, she initially blames Anita 'totally' (p. 282) for her state. To what extent was Meena's fall from Trixie really Anita's fault? Who else might be said to be responsible and why?



### Text focus

Read several times the passage on p. 282 which starts ‘For the first few days of...’ and ends with ‘...uncoordinated hand.’

- Syal communicates Meena’s (unreasonable?) fury with Anita with the joke about rattling the metal cage (over her injured leg), but the image tells us just how angry the child feels at being incarcerated in hospital for four months.
- Syal uses humour, too, to summarise the dull and undignified day-to-day life in hospital with its unappealing food and cheerful nurses who have to do everything for Meena.
- The image of the ‘sharp clawed creatures...trapped underneath the plaster and scrabbling to escape’ is a powerful metaphor which really communicates the nagging pain that Meena is suffering.
- The mood changes mid-paragraph with the adverbial phrase ‘After a while’, which conveys the passing of time.
- Words such as ‘gradually’, ‘today’ and ‘next week’ rather languorously add to the sense that this really is a long stay in hospital.
- Syal invents for Meena the image of Anita as a child’s drawing, which can be gradually erased if Meena uses this ‘enforced separation wisely.’ She envisages Anita disappearing bit by bit until she is ‘nothing but a smudge’.
- This passage relates to the themes of friendship and of growing up in *Anita and Me*.

## Education

Ideas about the importance of a good education and its power to save people from a dismal future like Anita’s are threaded through *Anita and Me*.

Meena’s parents are both college graduates. Mr Kumar did a degree in liberal arts and philosophy in Delhi (p. 84), where he met his future wife who was training as a teacher. These qualifications have enabled them to get reasonably well-paid professional jobs in England. Both speak perfect English.

Although they had almost nothing when they arrived, the Kumars have been able to buy their rather basic house in Tollington, and at the end of the novel they are in a position to buy a four-bedroom bungalow in a ‘better’ area near their friends. Education means a better lifestyle and being deprived of it can, in their view, lead to disaster, as Mrs Kumar points out to Meena (p. 212).

In *Anita and Me*, education is presented as a route to better things





Their education means that the Kumars can — and do — talk to Meena in a reasoned way. They rarely shout and they never hit her, so her experience is very different from that of the Rutter children, whose parents are certainly noisy and aggressive, and probably violent.

Mrs Kumar is a teacher at the infants school in Tollington, having taught other age groups in Delhi. She helps Meena with her school work while she is in hospital (p. 281) and often puts on a ‘teacher’s voice’ (p. 257, for instance).

Like all their Indian friends, the Kumars are desperate for their children to get a good, free education, which means that Meena has to pass the 11-plus exam so that she can go to the girls’ grammar school. That makes Meena different from the other children because no one has passed the 11-plus in Tollington for ten years.

#### Key quotation

**I knew how much was riding on this paper [the 11-plus exam] — my parents’ hopes for the future, the justification for their departure from India, our possible move out of Tollington. None of this was ever said to me directly but I knew them well enough to read the conflict in their attentive faces.**

(Meena, p. 306)

#### Key quotation

**If I failed, my parents’ five thousand mile journey would have all been for nothing.**

(Meena, p. 213)

Anita goes to the ‘spanking new comprehensive’ (p. 213) school 20 miles away, which is not what the Kumars want for Meena. It is not what she wants for herself either. She realises that failing her exam would mean being at the same school as Anita for seven years and that begins to worry her, although she is not sure why (p. 213).

Syal also develops the education theme through Sherrie, who is a ‘comp wench’ like Anita, although she comes from a much more stable family, who move away from the village at the end of the novel having sold their land for a good price.

Fat Sally, on the other hand, is a year older than Meena and a year younger than Sherrie. Her parents work hard, but she rarely seems happy. Look at the way she unhappily scoffs a cake at the fête (on p. 189). She is going to the fee-charging school because her parents want something better for her — another example of education perceived as a route to better things.

## Social change

Tollington is at the end of one era and the beginning of another, so there is a lot of change during the two years which *Anita and Me* covers.

Meena’s family have bought their bathroom-less house, which would once have been occupied by a miner and his family, very cheaply. At the end of the novel (p. 326) Mr Kumar puts the house on the market, having received a ‘tip-off’ from Mr Singh, presumably that this is a good moment to sell for a good price (because developers want sites in the village upon which to build new houses?)

Signs of the old mining industry are quite quickly disappearing as Tollington turns into a residential ‘feeder’ village for nearby Wolverhampton and loses its distinctive identity in the process. At the beginning of the novel, the villagers all know each other and there is some sense of community, but Syal is showing us the very end of this way of life.

There is already, for example, light industry nearby, such as the factory that employs the Ballbearings women.

The ways in which the village changes during the novel include:

- motorway link built nearby — open when Meena comes home from hospital (p. 293)
- village school demolished (pp. 269–73) and a supermarket to be built on the site (p. 302)
- new combined infant and junior school for Tollington on the growing Bartlett estate (pp. 297–98)
- more strangers in the park and elsewhere in the village (pp. 298 and 301)
- cornfields opposite the Kumars’ house sold for building by Mr Pemberton and pegged out ready (pp. 293, 299 and 302)
- new building in the old mine yard by the Big House (pp. 293 and 302)
- Sherrie’s father sells his land for building the motorway slip road and housing (p. 236) and moves away

By the time the Kumars leave, the old way of life is almost over, leaving people like Anita and Tracey in Tollington to cope with change as best they can.

With hindsight, Syal makes Meena aware of this sense of everything changing: ‘my childhood would begin ebbing away with the fall of the autumn leaves,’ she says (p. 259) and ‘this near tragedy reuniting Tollington for one last brief affair’, referring to Tracey’s accident (p. 320).

## Grade **booster**

Tollington is changing as Meena is growing up, so Syal shows us the change in the narrator’s thoughts and attitudes too, as well as in other characters. In a sense the whole novel is about change. Make a plan and notes for an essay which asks the question ‘How does Syal present change in *Anita and Me*?’ Remember that this gives you the opportunity to write about change in various forms — in the village, in Meena and in Anita, for example.

## Pause for thought

What does a village like Tollington lose from the changes Syal shows us in *Anita and Me*, and what does it gain? Are there advantages in a new school, supermarket and motorway access? Try dividing a piece of paper into two columns headed ‘advantages’ and ‘disadvantages’, under which you list the pros and cons of social change in Tollington as a way of organising your thinking.

### Key quotation

**The mine and the village had been as intertwined as lovers, grateful lovers astonished by their mutual discovery...**

(Meena, p. 14)

### Key quotation

**Much later on, when mama had made every parent’s transformation from semi-divine icon to semi-detached confidante...**

(Meena, p. 132)



## Review your learning

(Answers on p. 90)

- 1 What do we mean by a theme in a novel?
- 2 What are the main themes in *Anita and Me*?
- 3 Why does education matter so much to the Kumars?
- 4 How does Syal convey her feelings about racism?
- 5 How does Syal develop the theme of change in *Anita and Me*?
- 6 What does Syal want us to understand about friendship?



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