

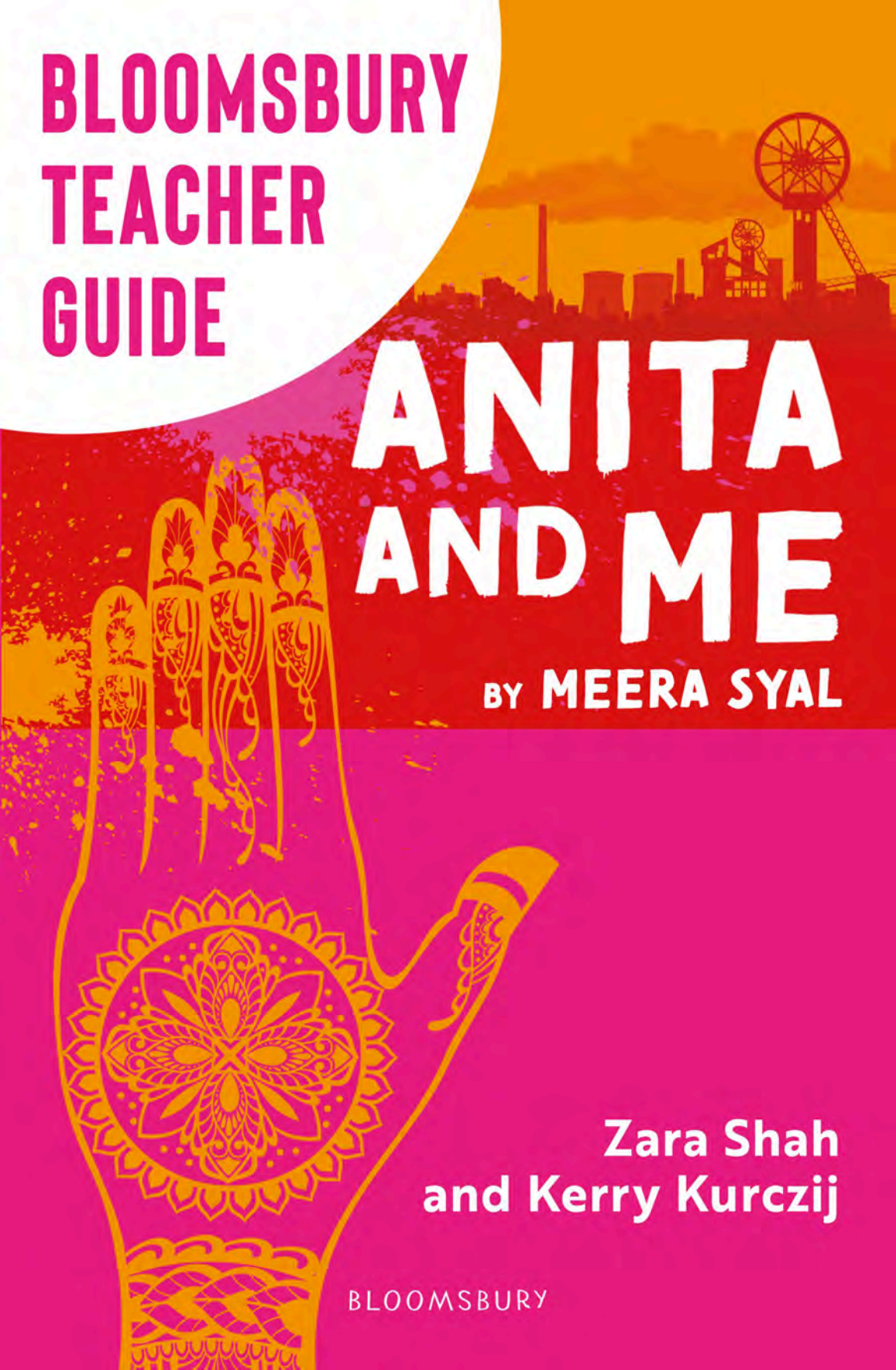
**BLOOMSBURY
TEACHER
GUIDE**

ANITA AND ME

BY MEERA SYAL

**Zara Shah
and Kerry Kurczij**

BLOOMSBURY



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TEACHER
GUIDE**

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and
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INTRODUCTION TO ANITA AND ME

“

‘...those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong.’

(Syal, 2004, p. 10)

”

Born to Indian immigrants in a small mining town in central England, Feroza (Meera) Syal tracks some of her experiences in her critically acclaimed, semi-autobiographical novel, *Anita and Me*. Winning a Betty Trask award and shortlisted for the Guardian Fiction Prize, Syal's novel is set in 1972 Tollington, a fictional mining village on the cusp of change. Syal's protagonist, Meena, tracks the lived experiences of the Indian diaspora. Her daily struggle for individuality and independence runs in parallel to her parents' struggle following partition from the British Raj in 1947 India.

Anita and Me is a typical Bildungsroman with various overt and implicit allusions to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). The book itself is presented by Meena to her friend Robert, and the 'Big House' in Syal's novel bears a stark resemblance to Harper Lee's depiction of Boo Radley's house. The thematic similarities are also apparent as both protagonists demonstrate a perceptive awareness of racial othering and discrimination, and through their lens of innocence as children, cast a brutally honest light on these issues.

Tracking the text

Considering the structural decisions any writer makes is a crucial way of engaging with and analysing authorial intent and reader positioning. The points below can be used for assessing understanding of the chapter: learners can be asked to place them in the correct order, for example. Discussions can also be had around how things would have been different had the events taken place in a different order.

- The novel begins in Tollington as Meena Kumar (nine years old) is being questioned on why she has a pocket full of sweets. Meena's parents don't like her lying. (Chapter 1.)

- Announcement of the arrival of Meena's baby brother, Sunil. (Chapter 4.)
- Meena escapes the Diwali celebration to attend a fair while her parents are distracted with Sunil's birth. (Chapter 5.)
- Meena is left to spend unsupervised time with Anita, who is a bad influence on her. They write to the Cathy and Claire problem page. (Chapter 6.)
- Meena and Anita steal a charity box. Meena pins the blame on Baby and Pinky. (Chapter 6.)
- Meena attends a local fete with her papa, where racist tensions arise, driven by Sam Lowbridge. (Chapter 7.)
- Meena's Nanima (grandmother) comes to visit. This visit changes Meena as she connects with her Nanima immediately. Meena starts to develop a bond with Sunil, feel protective towards Nanima and appreciate the sacrifices her parents made. (Chapter 7.)
- Anita's mother, Deirdre, abandons Anita, leaving her to live with the local butcher. This is the first time Meena sees Anita cry. (Chapter 7.)
- Anita is invited round to Meena's for tea. Meena lies and her parents run with it. (Chapter 10.)
- There is a violent race attack in Tollington. (Chapter 11.)
- Meena breaks her leg and ends up in hospital for months. She begins to communicate with another patient, Robert, whilst also studying for the eleven-plus exam. (Chapter 12.)
- Meena gets involved in more mess the night before the eleven-plus. She is discovered in the bushes with Sam Lowbridge. (Chapter 13.)
- Tracey nearly drowns in an accident. Sam and Anita blame each other. (Chapter 13.)
- Meena takes the eleven-plus, passes and moves away from Tollington. (Chapter 13.)

Assessment objectives

Assessment objectives establish the criteria by which pupils will be evaluated. We have aimed to address each objective in every chapter of this guide. It is essential to familiarise yourself with these objectives and also to review past paper questions (available online through respective exam board platforms) to see how these objectives are used in the exam context:

- **AO1** Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.
- **AO2** Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.
- **AO3** Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts.
- **AO4** Range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

(Department for Education, 2013)

CHAPTER 1 OF ANITA AND ME

At a glance

- › **Chapter summary quotation:** ‘a little Indian girl [...] caught telling lies’ (p. 15) 
- › **Big Question:** How does this chapter explore the difficulties associated with living morally?
- › **Significant plot event:** Meena is caught lying.
- › **Character focus:** Anita, Mr Ormerod
- › **Key themes:**
 - Truth vs lies 
 - Family discipline and guidance 
 - Innocence 
- › **Handle with care:**
 - Reference to racially offensive and abusive terms in this chapter will need to be handled with sensitivity. Please refer to the ‘Handle with care’ guidance in the ‘How to use this book’ section for further support.
 - ‘piccaninny’ (p. 20)
 - ‘darkies’ (p. 22)
 - ‘peer up girls’ dresses’ (p. 22).

Why?

‘Why’ is important not only within the world of the text, but also when considering authorial intent and messaging.

- Why does Meena lie?
- Why does Syal create a protagonist whose first introduction to the reader is to tell lies, even to her own father? Is it so that we, as readers, are immediately hooked? Or perhaps because grappling with ‘truth’ is a universal experience we all recognise?

Syal has Meena admit the truth, both to the reader and her father, fairly swiftly by the end of Chapter 1: “I was lying,’ I said in a whisper’ (p. 23). So, yes, we have a liar on our hands, but a truth-teller too. This is the beauty and appeal of the child narrator: her childish chatter of the mind intertwined with her, at times, searingly insightful moral and social commentary. Will this stay consistent throughout the novel as her age and experience of life and relationships increase? Why is this opening important?

This allows us to consider Chapter 1’s Big Question:

How does this chapter explore the difficulties associated with living morally?

What?

What happens?

Meena, a young girl, is forcibly marched by her father back to the scene of her alleged crime (spending money taken without permission from her mother’s purse on sweets at the local corner shop). She recounts details of the local inhabitants and their lives, prompted by landmarks and areas they walk past and through. At first, she protests her innocence, but tells the truth at the end of the chapter.

Social, cultural and historical context

It is important for learners to fully understand, appreciate and be able to realistically envisage life in the fictional village of Tollington in 1972 for nine-year-old Meena. They may require pre-teaching activities on the following features of social, cultural and historical context so they can write about them confidently.

The two main topics to note are immigration to Britain in the second half of the 20th century, particularly partition and colonialism, and the economic and social climate and the divides in 1970s Britain. The following are some useful quotations to consider when discussing this context with learners.

Housing: ‘row of terraced houses’ (p. 11); ‘two-up-two-downs’ (p. 11); ‘posh, po-faced mansions’ (p. 11); ‘the Big House’ (p. 13).

Gender: ‘Working Men’s Club’ (p. 11); ‘the hormonal balance of Tollington was turned upside down’ (p. 19); archaic attitudes to early forms of ‘upskirting’ (p. 22).

Religion: ‘Methodist church’ and ‘Sunday school’ (p. 11).

Economic change: ‘only one working farm now’ (p. 11); ‘the old pithead of the mine’ (p. 13); ‘industrial chimneys’ (p. 11); ‘new families started moving in’ (p. 14).

Social change: corporal punishment; casual racism; ‘piccaninny’ (p. 20); ‘so many darkies’ (p. 22).

Vocabulary in context

The following vocabulary from Chapter 1 can be pre-taught to help with reading fluency and reduce cognitive load. What does each of the following words mean in context?

Word	Quotation	Definition
starched (adj.)	‘the collar of my starched cotton dress’ (p. 11)	stiffened with a cleaning product called starch
jaunty (adj.)	‘walking along with that jaunty air’ (p. 11)	carefree; hopeful; fun-loving
leonine (adj.)	‘the sharp leonine nose’ (p. 11)	lion-like
sauntered (v.)	‘she had sauntered past’ (p. 17)	walked with a confident, almost arrogant, air
cohorts (n., pl.)	‘with her two regular cohorts’ (p. 17)	people someone associate with
maenads (n., pl.)	‘They appeared ensemble as coiffured maenads’ (p. 19)	women in a frenzy; showing uncontrolled behaviour
succubus (n.)	‘They drew energy from me like a succubus’ (p. 20)	powerful female demon

PIT STOP

Retrieval point

Return to this vocabulary in a later lesson, assessing if learners can link each key word to the relevant character(s). For a bonus point, develop each link into an analysis of how the writer’s language choice presents that character.

Examples:

- What might ‘the starched cotton dress’ Meena is made to wear by her mama (perhaps in contrast to her own ‘slop-around outfit’ (p. 12)) reveal about how much of a struggle it is for her at the beginning of the novel to define her own cultural identity?
- What might ‘the starched cotton dress’ Meena is made to wear by her mama suggest about how restricted she currently feels, unable to make her own decisions and exercise her own freedoms?
- What first impressions might Syal be trying to give the reader about 12-year-old Anita in choosing ‘sauntered’ as one of our first descriptors of how she moves?

PIT STOP

Direct instruction point

Embedding and tailoring quotations to fit our required meaning is an essential skill. Use the 'think-aloud' method (see below) to model how to turn the complete quotation into a summary: 'I realised, sadly, that whoever lived in the Big House would not break their solitude to save a little Indian girl who had been caught telling lies' (p. 15).

The 'think-aloud' method is a live teacher demonstration with metacognitive narrative accompanying writing, meaning the teacher verbalises what they are doing and thinking while completing a task. You might say something like, 'Right, I need to decide which words to focus my attention on when I'm summarising this really important quotation...'

PIT STOP

Academic writing point

Learning and rehearsing synonyms for 'lies' could also be a practical, active step to answering the Big Question: **How does this chapter explore the difficulties associated with living morally?** For example: fabrications, untruths and falsehoods.

Discussion point: Why wouldn't 'fibs' or 'porky-pies' serve as well in the context of academic writing?

Plot and character development

For tips on how to approach these 'What' questions, refer to the 'Plot and character development' section of 'How to use this book' on pages 5–6 of this guide.

1. What is stereotypical about the false family memories Meena fabricates in the opening of the novel?

Example responses:

- Working in a sweatshop.
- Poor, cramped conditions (including sharing the bed with other immigrants).
- Out of touch with world affairs.

2. What does the reader learn about Meena's papa and mama in the opening of Chapter 1?

Example responses:

Papa has a strong sense of morals and principles ('public shame' (p. 22) was something he hated). He's not angry initially, but entirely purposeful in returning Meena to the scene of the crime. He is ever-careful and nurturing, checking for traffic along the 'twisting country lane' (p. 11) even though he is set on getting to the shop and the truth. He is courteous to all, exchanging 'pleasantries' (p. 16) with Mr Topsy/Turvey and refusing Mr Ormerod's religious invitations with 'such grace' (p. 21).

Mama fell in love with papa because of his 'jaunty' (p. 11) walk. She sometimes wears 'slop-around outfits' (p. 12). She and her fabrics stand out against the backdrop. She is conservative in that she banned Meena from watching TV for two weeks. She enjoys dressing her daughter in highly embellished feminine wear.

PIT STOP

S-T-R-E-T-C-H

As well as learning about Meena's parents as individuals, what clues can learners identify in Chapter 1 as to their loving, fond relationship, and how it is different, perhaps, to many of the more 'functional' British couples in Tollington?

Example responses:

- 'that jaunty air that my mother said had made her fall in love with him' (p. 11)
- 'my parents for whom every leavetaking was accompanied by squeezes' (p. 20).

3. What does the reader learn about where Meena lives from the opening of Chapter 1?

Example response:

The village of Tollington, formerly a mining community, has a 'single road' and a 'crossroads' (p. 11). The town's 'nerve centre' or hub contains key destinations, including Mr Ormerod's grocery shop, the Wesleyan Methodist church, the Working Men's Club and the school. It has previously been a place of agricultural plenty but now 'only one working farm' (p. 12) remains. Smoking chimneys can be seen in the distance and there is a 'small overgrown park' (p. 12) where the children gather. The Big House, set in its own private grounds, is a mysterious otherly dwelling in Tollington.