

Interviewee: Meera Dattani

Interviewers: Lata Desai & Rolf Killius

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Address: 6 Eastlake Road, SE5 9QL

Summary :

Meera Dattani, a travel journalist and editor, discusses her family's migration from East Africa to the UK following Idi Amin's decree in 1972. Her grandparents, originally from Gujarat, India, established businesses in Uganda. Dattani's father, who attended boarding school in Surrey, feels more British, while her mother's side is more connected to Uganda. Dattani identifies as British Indian and feels at home in Britain, Uganda, and India. She emphasizes the importance of understanding colonial history to foster better societal understanding and pride in multiculturalism. Dattani also highlights ongoing issues in East Africa, such as land ownership and poverty.

Outline

Meera Dattani's Background and Family History

- Meera Dattani introduces herself as a travel journalist and editor living in London, born in East London, and raised in Chadwell Heath.
- Her grandparents migrated from Gujarat, India, to East Africa, settling in Uganda, and later moved to the UK after Idi Amin's decree in 1972.
- Meera's paternal grandfather arrived in the 1930s, followed by his family, while her maternal grandfather and grandmother moved later.

- Many Gujaratis migrated to East Africa due to British colonial influence, establishing businesses and family life.

Experiences of Family Members in Uganda

- Meera's uncle initially stayed in Uganda after 1972, hoping to reclaim their family house, but it was occupied by the military until the 1990s.
- Meera visited Uganda in 1989, the first time since 1972, and saw the family house from a distance, occupied by the military.
- Her father had a more British cultural influence due to attending boarding school in Surrey, while her mother's side was more connected to Uganda.
- The family's decision not to return to Uganda was influenced by the trauma of leaving their property and business behind.

Sense of Belonging and Cultural Identity

- Meera discusses the mixed feelings of belonging, with her mother feeling at home in India but still nostalgic about Uganda.
- Her father, who spent his formative years in the UK, has a stronger affinity with British culture.
- Meera identifies as British Ugandan Indian and feels comfortable embracing both British and Indian cultures.
- She describes her childhood as a mix of British and Indian influences, which she feels has shaped her identity.

Perceptions and Experiences of Racism

- Meera acknowledges that people perceive her differently based on their familiarity with her, with some not seeing color while others do.
- She has experienced being made to feel different or foreign in certain situations but tries not to let it define her experiences.
- Meera believes that her background and upbringing have shaped her resilience and ability to counteract discomfort.
- She identifies as Indian first but also as British Ugandan and Asian, reflecting her multicultural heritage.

Impact of Colonial Past and Migration

- Meera discusses the ongoing impact of colonial history and the importance of teaching it in schools to foster better understanding.
- She expresses frustration with efforts to downplay or rewrite history, emphasizing the need for continuous learning and interpretation.
- Meera sees parallels between the experiences of her parents and current migrants, noting that many move due to desperate situations caused by colonial legacies.
- She believes that greater knowledge of Britain's multicultural history could lead to greater pride and understanding among the population.

Hopes and Challenges for the Future

Meera hopes for a society that better understands its colonial past and the reasons for its multiculturalism.

- She acknowledges that while racism and prejudice cannot be eliminated, greater understanding could lead to greater pride and acceptance.
- Meera feels hopeful about the new generation's open-mindedness but is also disheartened by social media and certain attitudes.
- She identifies Britain as her home, feeling at home in Uganda and India as well, but firmly stating that Britain is her home.

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Meera Dattani 00:13

My name is Meera Dattani. I live in London, and I currently work as a travel journalist and travel editor. I was born in East London in in Barking ho spital, and I grew up in Chadwell Heath, a small London town between Romford and Ilford in Essex. Both sets of grandparents migrated to East Africa, first from India, from Gujarat, in different ways, and set up business and family life in in Uganda and in Kampala, specifically by the end. And then, of course, in 1972 Idi Amin issued his decree for all Ugandan Asians to leave. And so that is why my both sets of grandparents ended up settling in the UK. I know they were long journeys by sea at the time, so leaving from one of the Arabian Sea ports and then into Mombasa. I know on my father's side, my grandfather arrived first, because often that's what happened. You came over to to work in a in a business, and then you would perhaps bring your your family over. And my, I believe my mother's father's, my maternal grandfather, who I never met, he died very young. Also did the same. So my maternal grandmother also came over to Uganda a bit later. So what I know about that journey was just that it was, you know, it was long, but it was common. You know, a lot of people from a lot of Gujaratis did go to East Africa because of British Empire and wanting to establish, you know, business and in their colonies. So there was a lot of movement My grandfather, my paternal grandfather came over in the 1930s I believe. Yeah, that would make sense, because the eldest siblings were, yeah, born in the early 1940s so yeah, he came over around the 1930s and then my grandmother would have followed after that, obviously, after 72 when most Ugandan Asians had left. I mean, some had stayed because of different positions. And actually my uncle, who ended up moving back to Uganda, he actually did stay in Uganda a little beyond that time, but not much longer. I mean, 72 but when, when there were requests for Ugandan Asians to return. And there was, there were promises that, you know, people could get their properties back then. I think in our family, it was kind of encouraged that somebody, somebody go back and try and try and do that. So that's when my uncle first started considering, like, moving back to Uganda. So I get, I mean, suddenly my uncle, that my that uncle is not around anymore. But that's what I know, that he went back fairly early, and the family house didn't come back immediately, because when I went to visit in I went for the first time in 1989 and it was my mom's first visit back since 72 and we didn't have the family house in 89 but my my uncle, my aunt and my cousin had been living in Uganda for a number of years. So and we saw the family house from across the road, and it was still occupied by the military. And I remember because we tried to sneak a photo, which we did get, but they immediately thought they saw us, and immediately, like, raise the rifles, and we kind of raced away in our car. So I think the house actually came into ownership in the 90s. So, you know, it took a bit of time

Lata Desai 02:57

When was this? I want to ask you a question about, I mean, obviously you probably didn't get a chance to talk to your grandparents or even your mom or your dad, the sense of belonging in Africa? Did they feel that they belong to Africa or they belong to India?

Meera Dattani 04:34

Yes, that's a good question. I think they so. I think they both have very different stories. So my my dad actually was sent to boarding school when he was 12 here in in in Surrey. So he, yes, he had his childhood in Uganda, but those what I would class as like your formative years, your teenage years. He was spending maybe just summers in Uganda, and maybe not even every summer. So my. Dad has much more affinity, in a way, with a lot of British culture, because he grew up here. In a way, my mom and her family, my mom's side, they're much more connected to Uganda, because, partly because the uncle that lived there is my mom's brother. And so there's a lot more talk about Uganda, lot more kind of memory sharing, lot, lot more nostalgia. And I think because we've managed to keep that link through that family and being able to visit with it's a bit different, whereas I don't want to speak for anybody, but on my on my dad's side, because my grandparents had to leave where, in fact, they were in the UK holidaying in 72 when the decree was announced. So they it was, it was it was decided by by the children. Really, that is better. They didn't go back. So they effectively just left their property and their business like you would when you go on holiday here and just never, ever went back to it. So I think in ways a lot more well, there's trauma on both sides, but I think the ways that that people left were so different. So I don't know, I think it's really hard to say what they feel, but I think we feel, I think most of us feel everything, like when, when my mom is in India. I feel that she is she feels so at home there. But then a lot of the talk is not about India, when they're talking about the past, because she didn't grow up in India. So I think culturally, when you go to Gujarat, especially, or just anywhere in India, you know that that is where you're originally from, but your childhood memories are nothing to do with India. She didn't grow up in India, nothing. So then it's all Uganda. So it's a real mix. I think. So I work as a freelance travel journalist. I write for a variety of publications. I also am a travel editor on a publication called adventure.com and then I do some sort of speaking and panels and run webinars and training for travel writers.

Lata Desai 07:07

Good, okay, now, um, I want to ask you this question about how, how do other people see you in respect to your community, and do do they call you foreign based on your skin color or your dress code, or your views on society and politics, or all attitudes to family values, and do they see you as different to the majority of the population? Okay, so when you have other people perceive you, okay, so when

Meera Dattani 07:38

you say other people, do you mean like anyone who's not Indian, basically, yeah, um, oh, I think that's a really hard question, because there are so many different types of people who are going to see me, how they how they see me. So I honestly believe, I honestly believe there are some people who, when I say they don't see colour, I think they either know me and we just, they just don't view me as, you know, the Asian friend or the Indian friend. It's just way past that, whereas there will be other people who where that will be the first thing they see, which is fine, because it's an obvious it's an obvious trait so called. I think that's really hard because I don't, you know, there isn't, like, one way that other people who are saying,

not Indians see me. I've definitely, you know, I've definitely been made to feel, you know, different or foreign in certain situations. But I wouldn't say that that for me personally, is my is the overriding experience that I have, maybe because I kind of, maybe because I kind of go through life, not always through that lens, even though I'm very proud to be Indian and Ugandan and British and a woman, you know, and brown colored like I like all those things, but I don't necessarily go through everything I do, through every feature I write, or every interaction I have thinking that is who I am, like, I'm just doing life, you know? So, yeah, that's the reason I find that really hard to answer. Because if you said, like, how you know specific situations, maybe, yeah, I could say, but I don't know all the different people I meet, how they're really viewing me. What are they seeing?

Lata Desai 09:43

Do you feel your your background or your upbringing shaped you, and any challenges or struggles over the years

Unknown Speaker 09:52

settling in this country?

Meera Dattani 09:54

years that I was growing up here so late 70s into the 80s, and let's say I left Uni in like, mid 90s, you know, those years where my parents, you know, were creating their lives here, I guess people didn't have like the friendship groups that you would organically have like the way I have now from my childhood, their friendship groups were really scattered, number one, and also very family based. So we did a lot, you know, family was so big, especially when we were growing up. And so I feel culturally, you know, the Gujarati side, the Indian traditions and customs and food and clothing and all of that were as big a part of my life as the sort of British influences, and I think I'm really, I'm really, I'm really grateful for that, because I genuinely look back on my childhood. And on one hand, it's like going to garba in the middle of, you know, November on cold nights at a local leisure center. But on the other hand, I wasn't restricted, and I also remember all my pop posters on my wall, so I really feel that I had a chance to to embrace both, and I wasn't forced. I didn't I didn't feel like I had to deny the Indian side, nor did I feel like I couldn't embrace the British side. So I do think that has shaped me, and that's why I feel quite comfortable here, until somebody chooses to make me uncomfortable. And even then, I feel I have. I feel robust enough to to counteract that to some degree, you know.

Rolf Killius 11:37

So I do identify yourself as Indian first, or mm, British Indian?

Meera Dattani 11:45

Yeah, um yeah. I've used so many different things. I've often said British Ugandan, Asian, British Ugandan Indian. I don't know why the British comes first. I don't think that's for any I think it's because of how it sounds. You know, Ugandan, Indian, British, just doesn't end like that. Doesn't seem natural. I guess I definitely like, I do see myself as, you know, I know it's, maybe it's cliched all the usual things. But, you know, like a child of, sort of three continents of you know, whether you want to call it children of empire, I don't know, but I definitely I don't. I don't. I could never say like I feel out through and through English, you know, I don't. But I also don't feel through and through Indian because when I go to India, which I love going to, I know I'm not Indian, you know, I don't have the same cultural reference points as an Indian woman my age. I didn't grow up with those films, even though I know some of them, I didn't grow up with the same music, even though I know some of it, and Ugandan is a very different one, because actually, I don't have a frame of reference for Ugandan pop culture, for example, but because all the stories that my parents told of their childhood in Uganda, I feel this kind of almost primal pull towards East Africa. So when I go to East Africa, even Kenya, because my partner's got Kenyan family that's become a sort of second home, or third or fourth homeland, whatever, I feel a real pull to Africa, which is completely different so I feel when I'm in India. So it's really interesting, how all these things have fed in over the years.

Rolf Killius 13:22

Can I ask a question? You are just telling when you you still go to East Africa, how did you feel the relationship between the communities over there nowadays? You know, because the Indian has more minority now there's a black, majority, and of course, there's some white people in India. How do you feel? Is the atmosphere there? Its a personal question

Meera Dattani 13:47

Yeah, Yeah, Yeah... so I how do I feel about it? So I know obviously when, when they're when they were colonies or when they were British protectorates, whatever. Obviously there were a lot of elites and hierarchies created, you know, with indigenous, you know, black people at the bottom. I feel very heartened when I see Ugandan and Kenyan like black Ugandans and Kenyans like really thriving and doing really well in whatever business they're in. I still feel uncomfortable about the way some communities and some people may speak to black Ugandans or Kenyans, and I don't like it, and where I see it, I will, you know, try to call it out maybe? I also feel very uncomfortable about how much, especially I noticed this more in Kenya, but sort of white, owned, like land, so, you know, the top, sort of, you know, because I work in travel, you know, a lot of the top lodges. And, you know, on beautiful, on beautiful in. Beautiful conservatories, and, you know, beautiful high up, breezy places are still like white owned. I feel like that maybe has not been, I wouldn't. I wish I had proper information on percentages and stuff, but I would assume it's really high in terms of so I think the the land for me, the land site, the land aspect, and who owns land and who's from that

land, I still think there's a lot of problems there. So it's mixed. I mean, I definitely, I definitely feel like people are doing better overall, but there are still, there still seems to be so many issues with poverty. And, you know, I've done tours in areas that I feel just like in India. So I don't think everything, you know, everything has not been corrected. And you can feel that kind of hangover, you know, in a way of empire, because it really wasn't that long ago. When people say it was, oh, you know, get over. It was ages ago. You know, it really wasn't. Takes many generations to correct that kind of system.

Lata Desai 14:00

That leads nicely to my next question I was going to ask you, is your attitude to the colonial past and teaching in schools, and how do you see that?

Meera Dattani 16:19

Yeah, I think I know there's been a lot of efforts, especially in the last sort of five to 10 years, you know, maybe longer, but in terms of in the public consciousness, let's say, to kind of bring more of that colonial conversation into, you know, history and geography and all the rest of it. And you know, whether it was, you know, Black Lives Matters in during the pandemic, you know, there's been various movements and things like that that have, you know, National Trust doing its big colonial countryside sort of audit, you know, showing the other side of history. There's definitely been a big step. Then I also get, sometimes I get really disheartened when you see things that say, you know, Oh, enough of this. Or you know that, like I said before, you know, that happened then. And it's like, you know, that's not really how history works. And it's not, you know, when you hear rewriting history really, really annoys me. It makes me angry, because history is there to be constantly interpreted and looked at and and there isn't, like one definitive interpretation, you know, you have to keep looking and learning. So, yeah, I think, I think there have been great strides made, but I also think, because we haven't done it in a good, gradual way, of just always learning about it, now, people feel like it's being, you know, shoved down their throats. So then you get this backlash, which is frustrating, because it didn't really need to be like this, so yeah, but I think you have to it has to stay in the conversation forever, really, because it happened, and there will be no time when you shouldn't be learning about British Empire. For example, I studied history for five years, and they never mentioned the word once. So I'd like to think that's changed since the 90s in some modules, anyway.

Rolf Killius 18:20

And you know, the present migration of Asians in this country. Are there any parallels to the experiences of your parents and ancestors? Not only the Asians, but any people who come in this country nowadays, the migration debate..

Meera Dattani 18:37

I see yeah, yeah, yeah, of course, huge. Yeah. I mean, you know, in the end, I think I do think some I'm gonna speak for for Britain, because, you know, it's where I live, and I'm familiar with the kind of national, kind of conversation. I do think there's a tendency to sort of think everybody just wants to come here because it's amazing here. And actually, you know, so many people are coming here because they have to. And you know, when people say, you know, couldn't they gone somewhere else? It's like, well, you know, at one point, Britain ruled over a quarter of the world's population. So English has become the language that everybody speaks. And you tend to want to go somewhere where, you know, for work purposes, where you can actually work. And so you know, in a way, you know, when you see the stories now, you know people are people are coming because they're leaving, you know, quite desperate situations, and they go, I'm not going to generalize. Of course, at any moment in time, you're going to get people, you know, moving for all sorts of different reasons, but in terms of the big migration story, yeah, people are people leaving because they either have to, like, with Idi Amin, what happened with the Ugandan Asians? Are they literally been issued an order to go? Or they're. They're fleeing because there's civil war in their country, and a lot of the times, not all the times, but you know, that has been caused by, you know, previous events, some of which Britain or another colonial power may have played a part in. And I think because we don't understand all the layers of that and how they you know, when you when you leave a country like Britain did in a lot of places, just like left, and you leave this power vacuum, then you create this system that you know, whether it's military rule or whatever, like in Burma, or where you just leave people in a way that that's, it's not, it's not a good way to live, and you're gonna, there's gonna be civil war. And so people move, and there's a lot of parallels, really, when you when you really think about it,

Rolf Killius 20:45

What should change in the society? What drives after and your personal future hopes Are there fears or challenges for the future?

Meera Dattani 20:57

In terms of

Rolf Killius 20:59

your life in Britain here. Can be personal, but it can also be look at the whole society, both whatever you want to say.

Meera Dattani 21:11

Hmm...What should change?

Rolf Killius 21:12

Or your wishes, or your hopes

Meera Dattani 21:13

Yeah. Well, you know, I do. I do think you know, knowledge is power. So I think if we can, if there is a way for you know what's happened in the past, whether it's, you know, colonial history, you know British history, you know, if there's a way for that to just be better known, be part of a national conversation without there being blame and things you know this just happened. You know, you didn't do it, but just learn about it and accept you know what happened. I do think that would lead to better understanding in society, of for example, why Britain is so multicultural. You know, there's a reason. You know, it's only sort of recent years, with the Windrush scandal, for example, that people started to even realize about the ship could win, you know, the ship, and people coming over and being asked to come by by Britain, you know, to help rebuild after the war. And, you know, I don't think a lot of people, there's still a lot. There's still too many people who just don't understand how Britain has come to be how it is. And I think if they did, I do think there'd be, you're not going to ever eliminate racism and prejudice completely, and that's, that's just life. I do think there'd be a greater understanding, but maybe even a greater pride, like, even a feeling of, like, Yeah, this is so cool. We have all these different cultures and foods and everything here, because this is how we were made. This is just how this country is made up, a bit like in, you know, in the US, you know, there are some countries that are really shaped by many, many cultures, and others are a bit more homogenous. And that's it. Neither is good bad, whatever it is, how it is. And I really think that would help. I don't know if I do. I feel hopeful. I don't know. Depends, If I go on Twitter, I feel completely disheartened, because that seems to be where will the crazies hang out at the moment? But then, you know, you you hear about, I don't know. I'll talk to a teacher friend, and they'll be telling me about some lesson they've had and what the kids have been saying, and how open minded they are. And you think, you know, maybe this new, maybe the new generation is going to be a bit different. Or do we all kind of change at a certain age and start to become a bit more conservative? But I think I've read stuff recently where that is that's changing as well. You know that people are not necessarily behaving differently as they get older. So I'd like to say that I'm hopeful that I think things will be better.

Rolf Killius 23:46

Yeah, do you call Britain your home?

Meera Dattani 23:48

Yeah? Yeah. I do, definitely. I do. You know when I when I'm away, there's many things about Britain that I crave and want to come back to. So yeah, yeah. But then I feel at home when I'm in Uganda and in India too. But I would definitely say that this is my this. I do feel this is my home. And anyone you know, I have been told to go back to where I come from, and I have told them that, yes, I'm on the Picadilly line back to Southgate, thanks. (laughs)...o, you know, I will not, you know, let, yeah, that's that is home, for sure.