

# SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIM IDENTITY IN THE UK

Maurice O'Connor  
Universidad de Cádiz

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims at examining the specific identity of South East Asian Muslims within the United Kingdom. Recent world events have brought Islam into the public eye and we shall explore the effect these events have had on Islamic faith communities residing within Britain. An affiliation with an internationalised Islamic brotherhood seems to be a comfort zone for many disenfranchised Asian youths who proceed from a Muslim heritage, and we shall look at how this identity may enter in conflict with an ideal of citizenship. The exclusion of these minorities from the discourses of nation can be identified as part of the problem, but we shall also examine issues of class as motivating factors. We shall be very careful to differentiate between a small minority that embraces  *jihadism* , the notion of  *jabiliyya*  and other radical positions that are in fact distortions of Islamic faith, and a much broader based faith community that feels trapped between secularism and an ever more polarised radical Islam. We shall elucidate upon how this population of South East Asian Muslims find themselves caught within a complex and sometimes incommensurable dilemma. On the one hand, they must confront the radicals within their own community who are distorting their faith values for their own ends, while on the other they must face an autochthonous community who will not truly accept their faith as part of the national fabric. This disjunctive makes a finding of their place in society more complicated as compared to their Hindu counterparts.

KEYWORDS: UK South-Asian Muslim Identity, Contemporary minority Literatures, the Islam Dilemma.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la identidad concreta de los musulmanes de ascendencia sud-asiática dentro del Reino Unido. Los acontecimientos recientes en el mundo han hecho que el Islam esté más que nunca en la palestra pública, por lo que exploraremos el efecto que este hecho ha tenido para las comunidades de fe islámica residentes en Gran Bretaña. El formar parte de una hermandad islámica internacionalizada parece gustar a muchos jóvenes asiáticos desfavorecidos de ascendencia musulmana, y comprobaremos cómo dicha identidad entra a veces en conflicto con el ideal de ciudadanía. La exclusión de estas minorías de los discursos de la nación puede identificarse como parte del problema, pero examinaremos también influencias de clase como factores desencadenantes. Tendremos cuidado de diferenciar muy bien las minorías ajustadas que abrazan el  *jihadismo* , la noción de  *jabiliyya*  y otras posiciones radicales que son realmente distorsiones de la fe islámica, y una comunidad de fieles mucho más amplia que se siente atrapada entre el secularismo y un Islam radical mucho



más polarizado. Dilucidaremos cómo esta población de musulmanes del sudeste asiático se encuentra atrapada en un dilema complejo y a veces inconmensurable. Por una parte, deben confrontar los radicales dentro de su propia comunidad que distorsionan los valores de su fe para conseguir sus fines, mientras por otra encaran una comunidad autóctona que no aceptaría verdaderamente su fe como parte de la construcción nacional. Dicha disyuntiva los coloca en una posición social mucho más complicada que la de sus homólogos hindúes.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Identidad musulmana del sudeste asiático en el Reino Unido, literaturas contemporáneas de minorías, el dilema del Islam.

There is a tendency by some Indian Studies scholars to equate ‘Indianness’ essentially as ‘Hindu,’ which, in turn, silences the also Islamic nature of Indian identity. If we look at the founding of the Indian nation state and to its most prominent symbol, its flag, we find that the white that separates the orange from the green functions as an emblem of peace between Muslims and Hindus.<sup>1</sup> Partition, on the contrary was the geopolitical expression that these two faiths could not coexist within a single “India” and subsequently Pakistan was born as the “home of Islam.” A common belief existed amongst a section of Indian Muslims that Hindu India regarded them as inferior and that, once colonial rule was terminated, they would no longer be safe in India.

Hanif Kureishi quotes his father as saying: “The Hindu regards himself as heir to the oldest conscious tradition of superior colour and as the carrier of the purest and most exclusive stream of blood which created that colour, by whose side the Nazi was a mere parvenu” (2004 51). This solemn indictment, pronounced by a secular Bombay Muslim and advocate of Western culture, is indicative of the rift that existed between a proportion of Hindus and Muslims at the tryst of Partition. Nonetheless, we must juxtapose this communal-related grievance against Mohammad Omar Farooq’s (2001) who assures that the rise in power of the Muslim League was significantly aided by strategic support from the Colonial administration whose ulterior motive was to counteract the growing influence of the Indian Congress. Other Islamic parties were entire creations of the colonial regime which, as Farooq indicates, implies that the British played a communal card so as to weaken the independent movement through the archetypal stratagem of “divide and rule.” British imperialism, therefore, was instrumental in provoking this antagonism that would result in Partition.

Ziauddin Sardar (2004), when speaking of the upheaval of his native East Punjab and being caught between two vying forces, indicates that “this application of force, the open warfare between two new identities anxious to recruit me, was the latest round in a long-running partition process [...] Partition was about attempts to distil what I should regard as my heritage into some new singular and potent essence” (21). This separation of colonial Indian into two “opposed” nations subsequently produced the largest exodus of peoples known to humankind (an estimated 25 million people) and, within the subcontinental collective consciousness, Partition has

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this motif was borrowed from the Irish independence movement where the green and the orange symbolise peace between Catholics and Protestants.



become the single most important event that defines their modern era.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, despite the mass migration of Muslims to the newly-founded state (principally these migrations came from East Punjab, Rajasthan Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Bihar) India has a current population of some 150 million Muslims.

## 1. SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN

The majority of British Muslims hail from the Indian subcontinent and Islam continues to be an important cultural reference for many. The majority of first generation émigrés, however, viewed the question of faith as a private affair and assimilation to western cultural mores was preferred over a public display of their Muslim identity. As Yasmin Hai (2008) testifies, whilst her father's generation would recite the works of Urdu poets or talk about the "great Islamic accomplishments of the past" in private, Indians had to modernise and become progressive, not repeat the same mistake of the past and cling to "old, regressive ideas" which had allowed them to be colonised in the first place (13). This ideological positioning is juxtaposed with the attitudes of a visible minority of second generation South Asians who prefer see themselves as Muslims first and foremost. This affiliation with revivalist Islam affords them a singular public identity outside the discourses of nation. Increasingly, there is a marked resistance within Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities (less so amongst Indian Muslims) to assimilation, to secularism, which they see as eroding their cultural values. In the case of Bangladeshi origin communities (the most recent arrivals and, therefore, at the bottom of the class and economic ladder) a sector of its disenfranchised youth use their affiliation with an internationalised Islamic brotherhood as a way to mask their own identity as diasporic Bangladeshis, which they may feel has negative connotations within British society (Kibria 2008).

Before continuing with this affiliation with global Islam, the pertinent question that arises here is if many Asian Muslims (to use the awkward umbrella term) suffer overt and covert exclusion from mainstream British society due to culture difference or if this exclusion has more to do with material motivations. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2000) reveals that seventy-five per cent of British Pakistani and Bangladeshi children live in relative poverty (162-163). Within the last twenty years in Britain, there has been a pronounced move away from the exclusionary and racialised politics of the Thatcher era to an ethos of multiculturalism as fomented

---

<sup>2</sup> In a great deal of Indian literature (Hindi, Punjabi and Bengali) produced around the time of Partition what we find are narrative strategies that bring forth what Alex Padamsee (2008) defines as a "concept of uncertainty" and "undecidability". The fractured nature of Kushwant Singh's short stories are exemplary of how this Partition literature mirrored the political reality of those troubled times. Urdu short stories written twenty-five years after Partition continued to draw from this fracture motif as "since Urdu writers and readers were drawn at this time from a constituency that cut across religion, region and political affiliation – and for this reason they tended to see themselves as a microcosm of the larger Indian society in 1947" (Padamsee 53).



by New Labour. However, as Rehana Ahmed (2009) indicates, this apparent accommodating of cultural difference is more superficial than profound and, whilst token gestures to culture difference are used for public display by the establishment, underneath we find that the class stratification of society is still firmly in place. Viewed from a minority perspective, making the crossover into mainstream white society whilst holding on to cultural values that are alien to western liberalism, is problematized to say the least. Cultural difference, it would seem, is a motivating factor that can lead to being materially disadvantaged.

The limits of liberal multiculturalism are exposed when members of a minority group enact, or seek to enact, cultural practices (e.g. arranged marriages; the wearing of the Hijab; protests against 'offensive' creative works) which threaten the liberal ideology of autonomous individual 'choice' or 'freedom', thereby positioning themselves beyond liberal 'tolerance.' (Ahmed 28)

Within a post 9/11 context, Muslims have suddenly found themselves at the centre of a media attention which can foment negative connotations as regards their cultural difference. This, in turn, complicates further their socio-economic position within a liberal capitalist society.

Whilst Pakistani and Indian Muslims do not feel the same need to "cover up" their national filiations as the aforementioned Bangladeshi disenfranchised youths, there is a tendency amongst a section of both communities to look at the "plight" of Muslims globally and to affiliate with the discourses of Islamic brotherhood. (Young men with no qualifications and limited access to the job market especially use this affiliation to move away from the bottom of the social scale in the UK). The radicalisation of sectors of diasporic Muslim<sup>3</sup> community in the UK can be defined by endogenous and exogenous factors (Abbas 2007). The pervading sense of alienation and disenfranchisement felt by these communities, on the one hand, and the augmenting of international "jihadis" who interpret Qur'anic ideals to their own ends on the other, has been instrumental in pushing a small number of Muslims towards the adopting of extreme positions.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the *ulema* (community of Muslim scholars) traditionally exercised a strong influence within their local communities, certain sectors of the South Asian community are becoming

---

<sup>3</sup> The radicalisation of Islam stems back to Egypt and to the figure of Sayyid Qutb who, during his imprisonment for his alleged implication in the assassination of Nasser, wrote *Milestones* which declared that the entire world (Muslim countries included) was in a state of *jabiliyya*, the abode of absolute ignorance. This led Qutb to the conclusion that "the rule of God's law must be the way of the world" and that "Jihad was now all-out war between the Brotherhood [an organisation founded by Hassan al-Banna that saw Islam as a complete way of life which amalgamated religion and state] and everyone else" (Sardar 34-5). Qutb's ideals resonated especially amongst Muslim students who perceived him as a type of Islamic Che Guevara and his radical interpretation of Islam quickly transcended Egypt's borders to penetrate the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Qutb was sentenced to death in 1966 and his hanging was perceived as an act of martyrdom amongst the Islamic community.

<sup>4</sup> A radicalisation of "traditional" religious values has also emerged within parts of the Hindu and Sikh communities where an ideological entrenchment is also occurring.

increasingly influenced by Islamic groups such as the Saudi-sponsored Wahhabi/Salafi scripturalism or the Palestinian-founded Hizb at-Tahrir that aspires to a unitary Islamic state (caliphate), to which they have ready access via internet (Lewis 2006). Notably, the inner city “rude boys” and the Muslim students<sup>5</sup> on campus within the UK are gravitating towards these globalised Islamic positionings and this indicates that, for many South Asians, their expression of Islam is intricately linked to identity politics. In the case of the ghettoised population, this new affiliation helps boost the self-esteem of those who feel alienated, not just by secularism, but from a society that does not fulfil their economic aspirations. This material exclusion augments a fractured sense of belonging<sup>6</sup> which comes about when an autochthonous population resists accepting these diasporic groups as part of the nation. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2000) calls for the need to look beyond race and to class distinction so as to understand the exclusion that many minorities suffer from. It is worth mentioning that the highest proportional prison population amongst minorities is to be found amongst Bangladeshi Muslims. Instrumental to their lack of mobility is a lack of achievement within the education system which, amongst other factors, can have to do with the language of the community. (Mothers are the traditional educators within the family fold, yet they often lack sufficient linguistic skills in English due to the fact that they do not fully engage with mainstream society.) Failure to get on thus becomes another motivating factor in that, without the sufficient qualifications, they find themselves at the bottom of pile within society. This social exclusion (both racial and class-motivated) can lead to the adoption of Islamic fundamentalism.

It must be pointed out that this adherence to the radical discourses of groups such as Hizb at-Tahrir is not representative of the majority of British Muslims and is comparable in its “fringe” status to the phenomenon of the British National Party (Appleton 177). These radicalised groups, unfortunately, become highly visible through acts of extreme violence and subsequently become confused as being representative of a much broader cross section of British Muslims. Furthermore, there is an undoubted “media value” in focusing on these radicalised sectors of the Islamic community, or offering images of women wearing the burka or hijab (when in fact a large proportion do not) which tends to manipulate negatively perceptions of British Muslims.

The suicide attacks on the twin towers in New York in 2001, the Madrid train bombings in 2004, and the London suicide bombings are all testimony to the seriousness of international jihad and have subsequently been the cause of an increasing Islamophobia with the West. The New York attacks of 9/11 have been instrumental in defining Western attitudes towards Islam, and the London bombing of 7/7 has only magnified these attitudes that 9/11 spawned. Within mainstream Britain, a certain sector of the population see British Muslims actively resist inte-

---

<sup>5</sup> The majority of Muslim tertiary level students come from South Asian communities. See Appleton (2005) for a detailed discussion.

<sup>6</sup> It can also be argued that during the 1980s there was a much more notable sense of cohesion amongst different ethnic minorities to fight together for racial equality and social justice. The Thatcher era ushered in an ethos of individualism and the smashing up of collectivism. The effects of this can be seen in how the sense of mutual help between distinct minorities became diffused.



gration, are subsequently unpatriotic and even condone terrorist acts (Field 2007). Whilst Hindu and Sikh communities seemingly pose no threat to a British collective consciousness, these and other global events have focused attention on the Muslim community, which is seen by many as threatening.

Within the UK this new sense of suspicion (that has arisen regarding these communities) has led to a questioning of multiculturalism. This attack not only comes from its traditional enemies within the right, but also from some parts of the left, which blame tolerance to difference as being instrumental in allowing radical Muslims a free hand. While certain 'madrassas cannot be equated with training grounds for "terrorists," some are places where extreme jihad ideologies are fomented or where international jihadists look to for new converts.<sup>7</sup> The connection between 'madrassas and the perpetrators of 7/7 was subsequently also partly to blame for these negative views of multiculturalism within the UK. This latest backlash has much to do with the paradigmatic shift within public perception of Islam of recent years which has switched from the exotic and sensual stereotype to that of the Muslim fanatic (Brown 2006). This about-turn became visible for a while during the Rushdie affair in the late 1980s and early 1990s and has gained currency in the face of the increasing current global jihad which has directly affected the UK. Traditionally, British society could be seen as tolerant of "minority" groups and adapted a *laissez-faire* attitude towards distinct ethnic and faith groupings. Paradoxically, as Yasmin Hai observes, despite the more meritocratic and tolerant nature of the nineties' in Britain, a certain sector of the younger Muslim Asian population (we could include Sikhs and Hindus here) were taking refuge in their religious cultures (232).

South Asian moderate Muslim intellectuals such as Ziauddin Sardar (2004) and Tariq Modood (2007) question the hegemonic nature of Western discourses of secularism and liberal individualism as juxtaposed with faith communities and see its "intransigent nature" as an obstacle to developing a more inclusive form of multiculturalism: "The thinness of some multicultural approaches, which focused on superficial differences –the 'saris, steel bands and samosas' syndrome– and not enough on faith, spirituality and power relations, was a feature that many of our interviewees [...] have been attempting to challenge and deconstruct" (Modood & Ahmad 201). Modood and Ahmad's informants<sup>8</sup> also spoke of a monopolisation of "Hindu Indian culture" within the media, where South Asian was seen as synonymous with Hindu. This lack of visibility of Muslims within the media could thus be interpreted as being linked to a preference for non-challenging differences such as Bollywood, and the consensus amongst some South Asian Muslims was that multiculturalism was a superficial and fashionable construct incapable of taking

---

<sup>7</sup> The Algerian Djamel Beghal, key organiser of the 7/7 London suicide bomb attacks, had been known to have used Leicester's mosques as a recruiting ground (Suri 53).

<sup>8</sup> Modood and Ahmad have used informants selected from a broad section of "moderate" Muslims who include prestigious figures such as Lord Nazir Ahmed, Humayun Ansari OBE, Humera Khan, co-founder of the women's Muslim group the an-Nisa, Yusuf Al-Khoei, trustee of Forum against Islamophobia and Racism etc.



onboard true difference. A section of South Asian Muslims look to the history of Islam to contextualise the notion of multiculturalism and point to factual examples to show that Muslim pluralism has historically existed where there has been one dominant faith (Modood & Ahmad 2006). The general consensus amongst Modood and Ahmad's informants was that mainstream and "moderate" Muslims were all pro-multiculturalism as long as that included faith communities. Eugenia Siapera (2007) assures that many British Muslim citizens are encouraging a debate which addresses the traditional left values of justice and equality, but viewed from the positioned perspective of being a Muslim in Britain. This position attempts to negotiate a third way that sees the practice of Islam as being culturally specific to a British Muslim identity.<sup>9</sup> This rejects both a turning away from Islam in favour of assimilation and the radical position that all British cultural outputs are alien to Islam<sup>10</sup> and thus pose a threat to its purity (Appleton 2005).

The lack of meaningful dialogue between secularism and faith perspectives within Britain is also extended to a lack of dialogue within Muslim communities. This is an important point as to lay the weight of blame solely on Western secularism, the "demonising" of Muslims or the phenomenon of adjacent cultures installed within the UK for radical scripturalism or jihad is not presenting the full picture. Sardar criticises what he defines as the "Modern Muslim" who is "opaque [...] arrogant of 'his' Islam" and advocates a return to the ideals of the Islam where "reason has always been the equal and necessary partner of faith" (67, 250). In *Unimagined: A Muslim Boy Meets the West* (2007), Imran Ahmad explores the disjunctive nature of dual identity and of how, as a Pakistani Muslim who wishes to adapt to life in the UK, he must negotiate his way through the complicated paths of assimilation while simultaneously maintaining his faith. Whilst the utopian idea of a global Islamic state united in peace and brotherhood do appeal to him, he secretly admits to loving "the heady freedom and excitement of the Western world, just as it is" (245). Like Sardar, Ahmad sees reason as the only path to faith and abhors the "superstition and prejudice that has wrapped itself around Islam like a cancer" (238).

Ahmad's commentary marks a general shift within the moderate British Asian Muslim community regarding its attitude towards radical Islam. The polemic caused by the publication of the *Satanic Verses* (1988) by Salman Rushdie brought this radicalisation to public attention and was met with condemnation across the

---

<sup>9</sup> This concept is not a new one, and we can find a similar attitude towards Muslim faith that was fomented in Aligarh University in Uttar Pradesh. The college's founder, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan advocated that an education which made Muslims proficient in Western ways would afford them agency. This appropriation, however, did not entail a compromising of Islamic ideals (Hai 9).

<sup>10</sup> For some South Asians who come from a Muslim heritage but have chosen secularism, an engaging with Islam becomes a means of understanding their dual identity. Yasmin Hai sees her new affiliation with the Qu'ran as a means of connecting her with her mother's heritage which she also perceives as being important to her cultural identity.



board within the Muslim community.<sup>11</sup> Whilst “moderate” Muslims were not advocating a *fatwa* against Rushdie, there was a consensus that he had gone too far:

As a British Muslim, didn't Rushdie know how fragile the elders in the community were? The pressures they were under, the fears that made them cling so fiercely to religion? His community didn't consist of Hampstead liberals, politically and culturally sophisticated, able to toy with sacred cows. Couldn't he have been more judicious with his art? (Hai 211)

Alibhai-Brown (2000) also expresses her disillusionment with the liberal consensus after the *Fatwa* was imposed on Salman Rushdie. She asserts that “we became orphans, simultaneously losing liberalism –until then the rock of our education– and Islam because of the insane way it was manifesting itself” (268). Edward Said (1993), when reflecting upon the paradoxical nature of the Rushdie affair assures, “To have provoked Islamic fundamentalism when once he had been a virtual representative of Indian Islam–this testifies to the urgent conjunction of art and politics, which can be explosive” (373).

The events of 11 September 2001 brought to a head the internal dialogue within the British Muslim community when the moderates realised they needed to publically speak out against the “hijacking” of Islam by a “West-hating militant ideologues” (Modood & Ahmad 190). So, whilst previously “moderate” Muslims were questioning liberal ideas of free speech and of how not all positioned ethnic and religious groups had the same access to the discourses of power, now they had to focus their attention on the fascist and xenophobic nature of fanatical Islam<sup>12</sup> from within. September 11 was the inflection point in this readdressing of Islamic identity amongst Muslim Asians and, as Hai points out,

Everything was different now. We British Muslims could no longer afford to remain aloof. We had to stop behaving like immigrants, hiding in our mental ghettos and start asking ourselves some uncomfortable questions about our place here. It was time we faced the fact that we were British citizens. (291)

Shiraz Maher, a former activist within Hizb ut-Tahrir, speaks of how British Muslims refuse to engage with anything beyond community and are becoming “sufocused” through this isolation from mainstream Britain (*The Sunday Times*, 13 January 2008). This phenomenon is augmented with the advent of digital broadcasting that is creating “digital ghettos.” In this closed off world, a hyper-reality can be created where the passive consumers of world events that solely intersect with Islam means that certain Muslims can become prone to developing a victimisation complex. If we take the social

---

<sup>11</sup> The Indian government decided on October 8 1988 to ban Rushdie's novel (only twelve days after its publication) realising the inflammatory effect it could have on India's then 100 million Muslim population.

<sup>12</sup> Ziauddin Sardar publically issued “fatwas” against the Islamic fanatics in *The Observer*, 23 October 2001.



disenfranchisement of many Asian youths in the UK, and add to this the lazy editorial jumps made on Muslim stories within the conventional media (Hai 247), then we find a perfect breeding ground for radical Islam, more often than not constructed on false myths and partisan readings of the Quʾran. Maher, himself captivated by the emotional “security” the Hizb ut-Tahrir offered, rejected both his British identity and his ethnic South Asian background as he appropriated the discourses of radical Islam. Only when researching the development of Islamic political thought in late colonial India at Cambridge did he begin to see the cracks in the Hizb ut-Tahrir ideology: “My research caused me to find marked points of rupture in both the historical and theological narrative of what the Hizb was having me believe” (*The Sunday Times* 12 August 2007).

A key motif within this ideology is that Muslims in Britain are living in *ja-hiliyya*, a state of ignorance and barbarism which is referenced within the Quʾran (Yai 274). To counteract this “state of ignorance,” Hizb ut-Tahrir defends the creation of a puritanical caliphate, an enterprise they see as being in conflict with secularism and individualism, the cornerstone of Western Enlightenment values. The glaring paradox is that, while the postwar South Asian generation came to Britain in search of a more entropic and non-interventionist society, many of their offspring now wish to return to a more orthodox form of social organisation where Islamic ideology leaves no room for other interpretations of governance. The tragedy of this radicalised generation is that they seek refuge in a distorted reading of the Quʾran that has little to do with religion and a lot to do with the politics of identity. Underpinning this affiliation with radical Islam is the masking of an ingrained sense of insecurity produced by a rejection they feel at the lack of equal opportunities (both socially and economically), and succumbing to these Islamic discourses endows them with a sense of belonging which the nation does not afford them. However, as Hai aptly concludes “Britain refused to see the Muslim extremists in their country as their story” (329) and the post 9/11 hollow rhetoric of Enlightenment values by the media and politicians has done little to further an understanding of this complex issue. This could lead us to concluding that multiculturalism is being increasingly viewed, both by “white” and other ethnic assimilated groups, as a weakening of “national” values and a sham, while those “Western-hating” ethnic groups become increasingly entrenched in the politics of violence and applaud any “victory” against the West, no matter how brutal it may be. Gilroy (2004), however, would prefer to view British society as being a “convivial culture” while Alibhai-Brown (2000) assures that ethnic groups in the UK (she includes “white English”) are becoming more at ease with diversity, but, paradoxically are feeling more insecure about their identity.

## 2. ISLAM AND COMMUNITY

A recurring motif in Hanif Kuresihi’s early work is how migrancy denies the subject a single identity, which in turn produces the sensation of becoming trapped between two distinct cultures that are themselves internally divided. As a secularist whose father is from an Indian Muslim background (the Kureishis were originally from Bombay but moved to Karachi after Partition) he has developed a particular interest in how Islamic ideology is shaping the identity of much of the



Muslim population in the UK. In *The Black Album* (1995), Shahid Hasan embodies a segment of that second generation of British Asian Muslims who find navigating between their secular British identity and their Islamic heritage an arduous task. These two positions are personified by Deedee Bridgewater, Shahid's literature teacher, and Riaz, ideologue to a group of disenfranchised Muslim students. There is a crossover between the sense of disenfranchisement certain Pakistani characters in the book suffer and Kureishi's personal experiences of being branded a "Paki" when growing up. Shahid suffers from the type of existential confusion border identities can produce –the narrative describes him as having "many warring selves" and of suffering from "provisional states" that "alternate from hour to hour" (157)– and this uncertainty creates in him a series of ambivalences that divides his sense of affiliation. Shahid's background and history is one of a youth who rejects his Pakistani cultural heritage to momentarily embrace its total opposite, white racist ideology. This paradoxical association with a discourse that abhors people like him speaks of an acute sense of self-loathing, a recurring theme in many migrant discourses. Kureishi's signalling of the detrimental act of mimicry flags up intertextuality with Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* where Chamcha, the mimic man, transforms into a beastly type of satyr which functions in the text as a parody of his attempts at impersonating the archetypal Englishman (Holmes 2001).<sup>13</sup>

As with Hari Kunzru's Pran in *The Impressionist*, Shahid in *The Black Album* has become "unavailable to himself" and this lack of self-knowledge produces a pendulum-like oscillation in his attempts to construct an identity for himself. From National Front convert, Shahid initiates a process of reevaluation of his own cultural heritage through Islam's sense of universal brotherhood.<sup>14</sup> This new affiliation has, however, a hazardous supplementary discourse which is that of radical Islam. Unlike his new comrade, Muhammad Shahabuddin Ali-Shah (alias Trevor Buss,<sup>15</sup> his "real" name), he will not readily subscribe to dogma. The central conflict that the narrative thus explores arises from Shahid's desire to be seduced by an Islamic sense of belonging on the one hand –construed as a refuge from the complexities of a postmodern and fragmented society– and his need to develop as a writer on the other. His sexual involvement with his literature teacher Deedee Osgood contextualises this conflict between a liberal notion of "free speech" and a complete surrender to Riaz's interpretation of Islam and jihad.

Seen from a post 9/11 perspective, the relevance of *The Black Album* is that it represents one of the first fictional accounts of the radicalisation of those dispossessed Muslim Asian youths who, while born and bred in the UK, were no longer seeing themselves as British. In McCabe (1999) Kureishi affirms that British society still finds itself trapped within a colonial dictum and it is an issue that still needs to be dealt with

---

<sup>13</sup> Kureishi has Shahid exclaim that he is turning into a monster.

<sup>14</sup> Ziauddin Sardar (2004) affirms that "A mosque is the essential accoutrement for strangers desperate to build a home in a new land" (1).

<sup>15</sup> A curious intersection with Kureishi's real life, in that Buss was the author's mother's maiden name.



if British society wishes to redefine itself as regards ethnic absolutism. Kureishi is not mitigating the pernicious effects of fundamentalism –the attempts to create “Islamic” purity and to exclude all things English– but, as a writer, he attempts to map out the route that many Asians from Muslim backgrounds take towards radicalism:

During the 10 years between the Southall riots and the demonstration against The Satanic Verses, the community had become politicised by radical Islam, something that had been developing throughout the Muslim world since decolonisation. This version of Islam imposed an identity and solidarity on a besieged community. It came to mean rebellion, purity, integrity. But it was also a trap. Once this ideology had been adopted –and political conversations could only take place within its terms– it entailed numerous constraints, locking the community in, as well as divorcing it from possible sources of creativity: dissidence, criticism, sexuality. Its authoritarianism, stifling to those within, and appearing fascistic to those without, rejected the very liberalism the community required in order to flourish in the modern world. It was tragic: what had protected the community from racism and disintegration came to tyrannise it (The Guardian, 5 April 2006).

The burning of *The Satanic Verses* is a pivotal moment in *The Black Album* and it is a moment when characters define themselves. There is a carnival-like atmosphere in the college yard as Riaz and his followers rally round to torch Rushdie’s novel: “And the former Trevor Buss and Muhammad Shahabuddin Ali-Sha, alias Brother Chad, who was brandishing it [the copy of *The Satanic Verses*] at the sky, laughed triumphantly” (236). Shahid, on the contrary, feels ashamed by the event, and can no longer keep up his schizoid affiliations to both his “Islam brothers” and the world of liberal letters that Deedee Bridgewater personifies. As they stand, these two positions are irreconcilable and the psychomachia the text explores is precisely which side Shahid will come down on. Riaz has entrusted him with his religious poetry but, in an act that speaks volumes of his resistance to dogma, infuses the “purity” of Riaz’s verses with strong sexual innuendo inspired by this raucous relationship with Deedee. As Holmes (2001) keenly observes, this inscribing of the profane upon the spiritual shows “the impossibility of monologism and the inevitability of dialogism” (301) and as the burning of *The Satanic Verses*<sup>16</sup> exhibits, the denial of this dialogism and the imposition of a single world view is as pernicious as the colonial syndrome still latent in British society.

In “My Son the Fanatic” (1997), Kureishi returns to the theme of secularism versus Islamic fundamentalism through the antagonistic positions of: paradise versus the terrainal; Puritanism versus hedonism; chastity versus libertinism etc. The short story explores a return to fundamentalism through the vehicle of the filial rupture as

---

<sup>16</sup> Holmes (2001) identifies an interesting intertextuality with *The Satanic Verses* where, as Shahid is to Riaz, Salman the Persian is scribe to Mahound. Rushdie’s scribe, as the trickster of many oral tales, alters the divine message given to Mahound and, when this “playfulness” goes unnoticed upon revision, serves to highlight the discursive nature of all faiths and dogmas. This was seen as part of the heretic nature of Rushdie’s text and, like Kureishi, the author sets about demonstrating how all religious or other ideologies can be open to reconstruction or reinterpretation.



a means of dramatising the social rift between radical belief and secularism which is a growing trend within many South Asian Muslim households. Parvez, the Punjabi diasporan, has assimilated within British culture and is proud at having been able to provide his son Ali with all his material needs. For no “apparent” motive, Ali has succumbed to a puritanical vision of Islam and the glaring irony is that it is the son who criticises the father for his “unclean” and Western material ways. Parvez, as a child, has been humiliated at a Qu’ranic school in Lahore and since then has divorced himself from Islam. However, he must suffer a new rebuttal at the hands of his son who chastises him for his close “friendship” with another woman. The only departure in the narrative from an otherwise Manichean positioning is Parvez’s aggression as retribution for his son’s humiliation of him. The story’s closing line has a bloodied Ali calmly retort to his father’s violence: “So who’s the fanatic now?”, and it is this final ambiguity in the father’s characterisation that Kureishi exploits in his screenplay of the film of the same name.

While “My Son the Fanatic” offers no way out of the impasse created by fundamentalism, *The Black Album*, like Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, ends up on an upbeat note with both of their characters negotiating their Islamic identity. Both novels come down on the side of secularism, and this easy transition can be seen as both optimistic and somewhat naïve. It is within the narration of the secondary characters of *Brick Lane* that the Islamisation of London’s Bengali migrants is overseen, and here we find a medley of (always) male firebrands and ideologues who coerce their community into radical positions. So, while a sense of Islamic brotherhood (personified through the Bengal Tigers) is beneficial in that it affords a cohesive community response against racism, their radical interpretations of faith hijack all other ideological postures. Monica Ali contextualises this monologic rubric in the narrative through varied specificities: families go without so as to fund the construction of a mosque back in the “homeland”; “salaat alerts” are sent out via mobile reminding devotees of prayer time; Bosnia, Chechnya, Palestine all become single “conspiracies” against Islam as viewed through the prism of ideology extreme; and all forms of music (including the Sufi devotional variant) are considered “un-Islamic” by the local Islamic ideologues.

These radical positionings in *Brick Lane* are put under scrutiny primarily through the “illicit” romance between Karim, firebrand and alma mater of the Bengal Tigers, and Nazneen. The first glaring inconsistency in Karim’s puritanical Islamism is his own participation in adultery, a state of *haram* (prohibited act) he unproblematically assimilates into his ideology of martyrdom and permanent *jihad*. The novel also flags up similar contradictions in faith positions such as the practices of extortionate money-lending between fellow Muslims. (Any form of money-lending is problematic in Muslim communities and extortion is definitely considered *haram*.) A pivotal moment in Nazneen’s coming of age within the novel is when she comes to see Karim’s visions of an “Islamic renaissance” as being just as flawed as her own husband’s illusions of total assimilation within bourgeois England. Furthermore, she now understands that, behind Karim’s transformation from inner city rude boy to jihadi propagating Islamist, lies a male ego-driven hunger to be at the centre of things so as to ideologically manipulate the masses. By positing women as being



less prone to adopting radical positions, the novel thus deconstructs the perceived steadiness of male characters and shows how their lack of flexibility and dogmatic views on life (both Chanu's absolute faith in positivism<sup>17</sup> and Karim's blind surrender to his version of Islam) become their downfall. On the contrary, female characters are seen as being less vocal and, while they do not engage in discursive abstractions, they are more apt in managing the difficult task of cultural transformation.

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* also tells a story of the travails of cultural adaptation. Changez is a young Pakistani boy on his sojourn in the US and while the American and British societies are distinct by nature, Hamid's tale does have an allegorical quality to it that makes it interesting to comment upon in the light of what we have been previously discussing. The story is framed as a dialogue between Changez, now returned from the US, and an unnamed male interlocutor with whom Changez engages with at the Old Anarkali Bazaar of Lahore. The novel's ambiguity resides in the fact that we only know about Changez through the story he is telling the American stranger, and the reader is invited to fill in other details which are left at the story's margins. Changez's first words to the American frame the novel's ambiguous nature: "Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard. I am a lover of America" (1).

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* references the inner conflicts Changez is faced with when attempting to adapt to American society, and there are certain commonalities between the protagonist's experiences and those of South Asian Muslims arriving to the UK. Changez (a brilliant Pakistani student who has been cherry picked to come and study in the US) goes through a series of transformations which the narrative suggests are directly influenced by the prevailing sense of alienation he feels in the face of a Western society. Subsequently, he develops strategies to mask this sense of alienation. What Hamid suggests from the outset is that when Changez first arrives to the US he has no special affiliation with his Muslim faith beyond what is dictated by tradition, and the reader receives no that this faith marks his public identity in a visible manner. In fact, Changez goes to great lengths to assimilate into mainstream American society, and the degree of his cultural mimicry becomes evident on a business trip to Manila (Changez has graduated with honours from Princeton and has been headhunted by Underwood Sampson & Company, a New York-based multinational) in the manner he reacts to the scenes of poverty he witnesses. They remind him of his own country and his initial reaction is to exaggerate his newly-constructed American identity as a means to distance himself from the poverty he witnesses. This initial reaction, however, is short-lived, and he feels shame at this sham he is acting out.

Changez's need to develop his talents through the "American Dream" is coupled by his attraction to an archetypal white American female. Changez has met Erica at Princeton and finds himself desperately courting her with an "Eastern sophistication" that she finds strange yet endearing. Themes of miscegenation are recurrent in diasporic

---

<sup>17</sup> As Cormac (2006) observes, Chanu "repeatedly refuses to confront the realities of his situation in favor of a fantasy built on pedagogic notions of both Bangladesh and England" (703).



fiction and, while the “opposites attract” motif lies on the surface within the narrative, a deeper reading of Changez’ attraction to Erica, whom he describes as a “Greek Goddess” (101), can be linked to a symbolic occupying of the national body through the seducing of the white woman. Whilst Erica’s family find his decorum impeccable and are impressed with his credentials, there is always an underlying yet palpable sense of “difference” that Changez knows is not so easily surmountable. Both the complex mechanisms of his own cultural mimicry which begin to produce a self-loathing in him, and the fraught nature of miscegenation (which the narrative makes even more difficult through Erica’s private past traumas) have a destabilizing effect upon Changez.

This is why it should not come as a surprise that Changez’s first reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers is one of quiet glee. It is as if an attack on America were some personal form of blowback<sup>18</sup> for the sense of inadequacy and frustration he feels because his assimilation into American society has not been as seamless as he might have wished. Changez grapples with the glaring contradictions of this reaction and asks himself the question: “why did a part of me desire to see America harmed? I did not know, then; I knew merely that my feelings would be unacceptable to my colleagues, and I undertook to hide them as well as I could” (84). Changez thus buries his “uncharitable and inhumane reaction” (90) to the suffering caused by 9/11 and persists in his attempts to assimilate at all costs into upper class New York society, principally through his association with Erica whom he accompanies on fundraising missions for the victims of the World Trade Center. Changez’s relation with Erica is thus central to the ambiguities that the text is flagging up. He assures that she “vouched for my worthiness; my way of carrying myself –I flattered myself to believe– suggested the impeccability of my breeding; and, for those who enquired further, my Princeton degree and Underwood Samson business card were invariably sufficient to earn me a respectful nod of approval” (97). Yet, his ultimate goal of assimilation into this echelon of society flounders due to Erica’s incapacity to surrender to him, and Changez laments that “her body had rejected me” (103). He carries this rejection quietly inside him as he does the backlash that the Twin Towers attack is causing in his part of the world: “I ignored as best I could the rumors I overheard at the Pak-Punjab Deli: Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding

---

<sup>18</sup> Chalmers Johnson, uses the term “blowback” to explain the dangers the US’s global imperial practices:

“Blowback” is shorthand for saying that a nation reaps what it sows, even if it does not fully know or understand what it has sown.[...] It refers to the unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people. What the daily press reports as the malign acts of “terrorists” or “drug lords” or “rogue states” or “illegal arms merchants” often turn out to be blowback from earlier American operations. [...] “Historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States. In addition, the military asymmetry that denies nation states the ability to engage in overt attacks against the United States drives the use of transnational actors [that is, terrorists from one country attacking in another]” (Chalmers, 2000, 8-12).



mosques, shops, and even people's houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centres for questioning or worse" (107).

Changez battens down the hatches and soldiers on "clad in his armour of denial" (108). However, behind this armour lies an augmenting unease at the islamophobia he witness around him. His indignation at America's attack on Afghanistan grows stronger and, more telling, the pain Erica's slow retreat from him causes. What Hamid suggests in his novel, yet never explicitly says, is that Erica's distancing from Changez and her steady retreat into the nostalgia of her first and only love Chris is what ultimately tips the balance for Changez. In a corporate world where public image is paramount, Changez performs the symbolic resistance of growing a beard as a means of protest at what he sees as America's increasingly pernicious influence upon Pakistan. While Changez is now fully aware of how his own participation in the US corporate world makes him complicit with American hegemony, it is on a business trip to Chile where he receives his ultimate "epiphany."

This moment of self-revelation comes about through his chance meeting with Juan-Bautista, proprietor of a small editorial who tells Changez the story of the janissaries, Christian boys who were captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in their army. Juan-Bautista assures Changez that these janissaries, assimilated by force to an alien culture, "were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to" (172). Juan-Bautista tells this story to Changez as a means to exemplify what he sees as Changez's possible surrender to an alien (American) culture. This analogy of the janissaries that Hamid offers becomes a means to frame Changez's subsequent turnabout. He confesses to his American interlocutor that, "There really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war" (173). While he has always been uncomfortable with America's ruthless pragmatism and its hegemony in his part of the world, he is now determined to sacrifice his "American dream" to be true to himself, whatever that "truth" may be. He defines this rupture with America as the "breakup of a romantic relationship that involved a great love [...] followed by a sense of euphoria at finally being liberated," although he feels haunted by a "desperate and doomed backpedalling of regret" (179).

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* thus reads as the allegorical journey of a young South Asian Muslim who travels from meritocracy to fundamentalism. Changez is brilliant enough to break through any glass ceiling that American society may put in his way, but it is cultural difference and his own resistance to a total suppressing of this in the name of integration which turns Changez in the opposite direction. In the hands of another writer, this turnabout could seem Manichean, yet, until the very end of the novel, Hamid resists any simplistic denouement. Changez tells his American interlocutor that, "As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own authority. [...] Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own" (190). This is



the story Changez seems to be telling himself as a means of justifying or mitigating what the reader starts to suspect is his engagement with fundamentalism.

Worth noting is the fact that being Muslim is never specifically referenced as a motivating factor for this fundamentalism. Changez is now a university lecturer whose mission on campus is to awaken his students into an active engagement with politics, principally to “free” Pakistan from American influence. His “ex-janissary skills” (203) help rally students “of all possible affiliations – communists, capitalists, feminists, religious literalists [...]” (204). Changez thus becomes the mentor of “bright, idealistic scholars” one of whom has subsequently been arrested by the American Secret Services, accused of planning to assassinate a development assistance coordinator. Notwithstanding, Changez assures his “American friend” that he is a believer in non-violence; “the spilling of blood is abhorrent to me” (206) he assures us, although the manner in which Changez is baiting this American seems to suggest otherwise. In the novel’s final pages, Changez tells his interlocutor that because of his now high profile status which is due to a radical interview he gave (this interview, he adds, has been included in the American “war-on-terror” montage) he feels like “a Kurtz waiting for his Marlow” (207-208). The American, however, has ceased to listen to Changez, and is now reaching for his gun as Changez’s accomplices close in for what we presume will be the American’s assassination. This final “sting in the tail” leaves one wondering how much of what Changez has been telling the American is fabrication (the “perhaps you are convinced that I am an inveterate liar” (208) is as much directed to the reader as it is to the American) and leaves us with little empathy for Changez or, at best, an inkling of the complexities of fundamentalism.

One might question why Mohsin Hamid takes such a pessimistic view on the possibility of assimilation for South Asian Muslims in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and one could accuse him of producing a contrived plot. A cursory glance at recent world events, however, bears out how fiction can pre-empt reality. One news story of a 30-year-old former financial analyst who tried to blow up a car on Times Square in May 2010 seems to give credence to Hamid’s allegory. Similar to the fictional Changez, Faisal Shahzad hailed from a comfortable middle class Karachi-ite background, had moved to the US when he was 19 where he studied computer science and then business at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut, and was assimilated into American society. A similar case is that of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the twenty-two year old Nigerian who attempted to blow up a North West airlines flight to Detroit on December 25 2009. Abdulmutallab was also from a privileged class, had enjoyed a private education in Togo and had subsequently gone on to study mechanical engineering at University College London. Across the globe, the lure of Islamic fundamentalism is (correctly) attributed to the poverty and injustices experienced by many who live in estamental societies where entropy is a fantasy. However, the cases of Shahzad and Abdulmutallab also bear out that radical Islam cannot solely be explained away through dialectical materialism; the ideology of fundamentalism is both attractive and potent for other reasons.

Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* prefers to take a more ironic stance on the travails of assimilation and cultural differences through her saga of three ethnically diverse families which includes the Iqbals, a Bengali family who first come to the UK amidst





the large post World War Two influx of fellow South Asians. Samad Iqbal, father to twins Magid and Millat, battles against his impure and un-Islamic ways, which include alcohol and “self-abuse”, or “the sin of *istima*” (lusting after other women). Samad is tormented by a sense that life in Britain and its daily temptations is leading him astray from the precepts of Islam. Smith’s narrator treats Samad’s continual self-flagellation with more than a pinch of irony and we feel that Samad is in fact quite at home with his earthly vices, despite his sudden interjections in his local (O’Connell’s) of: “I am corrupt, my sons are becoming corrupt, we all are soon to burn in the fires of hell” (192). Samad thus becomes intent upon sending one of his sons back to the homeland to become “a real Bengali, a proper Muslim” (215). Subsequently, he suffers a continual internal debate of “which son” and, until the last minute, it is his best friend Archie (a declared atheist and fellow patron of O’Connell’s) who helps him spirit Magid back to Bangladesh without the knowledge or consent of his wife Alsana.

This plot device that Smith uses of the separated twins bears certain resemblance to Salman Rushdie’s Saleem and his wicked nemesis Shiva in *Midnight’s Children*. Much of what unfolds in the rest of Smith’s *White Teeth* becomes a “what if” scenario; what if it were Millat who was sent to live in the Chittagong hills of Bangladesh instead of his brother Magid. This physical separation of the twins serves to highlight how identity can be performative by nature, where culture and society play a salient role. Magid’s correspondence to his parents from the Chittagong hills makes his life seem more pastoral in comparison, and Samad feels that his “unpopular decision” has been validated. In Magid’s letters, Samad detects “some change of tone, some suggestion of maturity, of growing Eastern wisdom” and that his son “is for God, not for men” (215). Meanwhile, Millat has developed into a full-blown teenager, with an intense engagement with 80s modernity. Smith makes a point of giving us a check list of Millet’s “stuff” which includes: Bruce Springsteen’s *Born to Run* album; a poster of *Taxi Driver*; a video of Prince’s *Purple Rain*; his shrink-to-fit Levi’s 501; his Converse baseball shoes, or his copy of Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange* (222). He also joins an urban gang, all of whom share his South Asian background. They are all archetypal “angry young men” who have suffered in the past because of their ethnic differences: “People had fucked with Ranil, when he sat at the back of the class and carefully copied all teacher’s comments into his book. People had fucked with Dipesh and Hifan when they wore traditional dress in the playground. [...] No one fucked with them anymore because they looked like trouble” (232).

We meet Millat’s “crew” on their way to a protest against Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford, despite the fact that they don’t even know who the author is. Rushdie is simply a visible target onto which they can vent their frustration, and Smith seems to be saying that much of what went as indignation against *The Satanic Verses* was merely the couched language of identity politics. As retribution for his participation in the burning of *The Satanic Verses*, when he arrives back home he finds that Alsana has also made her own bonfire in the family back garden feeding it with most of *his* stuff (his *Catcher in the Rye* copy, his *Mean Streets* video, his signed photograph of Chuck D., etc.). Her wry response to her son’s radicalism is telling in that, although a traditionalist, she is not participating in politicized reactions against secularism: “Everything is sacred or nothing is. If he [Millet] starts burning other people’s things, then he loses something sacred too. Everyone gets what’s coming, sooner or later” (237).





For the Iqbals, the confusion that Millat experiences because of his cultural hybridity becomes known in the household as “*The Trouble with Millat*” and motivates what is the archetypal split between first generation diasporans and their second generation offspring. For Alsana, her fears of his “dissolution” and “disappearance” (i.e. him becoming English and losing his Bengali identity) are fundamentally linked to Millat’s interest in white girls: “Even the unflappable Alsana Iqbal would regularly wake up in a puddle of her own sweat after a night of visions of Millat (genetically BB; where B stands for Bengali-ness) marrying someone like Sarah (aa where ‘a’ stands for Aryan), resulting in a child called Michael (Ba) [...]” (327). This growing rift between Millat and his parents causes his gravitating towards the Chalfens, an upper middle class Jewish-Catholic family (they were also once immigrants of Eastern European extraction) who take him under their wing and become fascinated with him despite his sponging and moodiness. Whilst he finds his own family suffocating and uncomprehending, at the Chalfen household he finds a sympathetic ear to which he can voice all the confusion he feels. Much of this confusion can be traced back to his hybrid identity and is specifically motivated by miscegenation. Millat (as his father before him) feels a strong attraction towards white women and subsequently has to face down criticism from his Muslim friends. His animal magnetism becomes a problem –the narrative assures that “there have always been and always will be people who simply exude sex” (368-9)– and it is Joyce Chalfen who best defines the nature of his lasciviousness when she assures that “boys like that want the tall blondes, don’t they? I mean, that’s the bottom line, when they are that handsome” (320). As surrogate mother figure, Joyce Chalfen attempts to “sort out Millat’s problem with white women” which the narrative assures are “numerous” (368). Millat, trapped between the secular values of free choice and an idealized identity constructed through Islam, develops a psychomachia where these two opposing ideologies do battle inside his head.

As Millat gravitates more towards the Chalfen’s, his mother Alsana feels that they are “Englishifying him completely” (345), which is her way of expressing that she no longer understands the complexities of her own son’s identity. Alsana’s niece, Neena, assures her aunt that “he’s running away from himself and he’s looking for something as far away from the Iqbal’s as possible,” and advises her to let him go his own way (346). Neena suggests that she worry less about the pernicious effects of the Chalfen’s and focus more on his involvement with KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation). Millat stays more and more away from the family home and he becomes ever more destabilised as he oscillates between the intellectual and liberal atmosphere of the Chalfen household and his affiliation with KEVIN. *White Teeth* thus locates Millat’s almost psychoid behavior as being the result of finding himself poised between cultures that should not necessarily be in conflict but, because of the ideological appropriation of faith values for political ends, have become incommensurable. This conflict within Millat spirals. He turns to Joyce Chalfen who is the only person who has the language to explain his angst and her conclusion is that:

Millat was filled with self-revulsion and hatred of his own kind; that he had possibly a slave mentality, or maybe a colour complex centred around his mother (he

was far darker than she), or a wish for his own annihilation by means of dilution in a white gene pool, or an inability to reconcile two opposing cultures [...]. (375)

Joyce's analysis seems to bear true; he is incapable of sustaining his relationship with Karina Cain, the "African goddess" (his only "true love"), and subsequently splits up with her in a torrent of rage. This emotional failure on his part motivates a "vow of celibacy" and his involvement with KEVIN becomes more intense. Smith thus equates Millat's sense of self-loathing, product of his own split-identity, with an ideological appropriation of Islam. This use of Islam as a means of expressing public identity gained prevalence in the UK from the 1980s onward amongst certain South Asian Muslims. Although a strain of Islamic conservatism could always be found amongst the older Muslim diasporic community in Britain, for the majority being a Muslim was principally a matter of private identity, contained either within the home or the walls of the mosque.

While Millat struggles with his own psychomachia, his twin brother Magid in the Chittagong hills is having quite a different experience. While immersed within a traditionalist Muslim society, Islam holds no special place for him, and he is also freed of the tribulations of his twin brother's cultural in-betweenness. Science, however, is foremost upon his mind and, through the now established ties between the Iqbal and the Chalfen family, he has become penpals with Marcus Chalfen, *pater familus*. Through their correspondence, Marcus recognizes Magid's brilliance. Their epistolary relationship intensifies, and Magid subsequently returns to the UK and ends up living with the Chalfens. Marcus is head researcher of a genetic engineering project and Magid commences work on "FutureMouse," Marcus' project which garners much publicity within the media, opening up the debate of the "morality" of tinkering with the genetic codes of humans and ultimately the ethics of "playing God." While there are many motivations that fuel the filial rift between the twins, Magid's involvement in Marcus' project becomes a convenient scapegoat upon which Millat can focus all his rage and confusion. Magid subsequently laments that: "My brother shuns me. [...] He marks me like Cain because I am a non-believer. At least not in his god or any others with a name" (429).

Through this Cain and Abel motif, Smith effectively deconstructs perceived notions of eastern sensuality and mysticism versus western rationalism and empiricism. Magid was the one who was chosen to return to Bangladesh so as not to be contaminated by the West's corrupting influences and to become a "proper Muslim", yet he returns to the West to become involved in "FutureMouse" which can be seen as a metonymic representation of secularism's highest aspirations. Magid thus becomes foil to his lustful and religiously fanatic brother who is ironically a product of western modernity. Yet, as the narrative later points out, both occupy the same temporal space within history:

The brothers will race towards the future only to find they more and more eloquently express their past, that place where they have *just been*. Because this is the other thing about immigrants ('fugees, émigrés, travellers): they cannot escape their history any more that you yourself can lose your shadow. (466)



While Magid's belief in his rationalism and empiricism brings him serenity, Millat struggles with this constructed Islamic identity that KEVIN affords him. Similar to Shahid Hasan in Kureishi's *The Black Album*, this identity, shaped through ideology, becomes a refuge from the fraught nature of his own cultural hybridity yet, like his father Samad before him, he struggles with his natural bent to be a *bon vivant*: "In fact, the problem with Millat's subconscious [...] was that it was basically split-level. On the one hand he was trying really hard to live as Hifan [KEVIN's maximum ideologue] and the others suggested" (444). However, he is still fascinated with the American Mafioso genre (*The Godfather, GoodFellas, Mean Streets, etc.*) which he projects his fantasies onto:

Worst of all was the anger inside him. Not the righteous anger of a man of God, but the seething, violent anger of a gangster, a juvenile delinquent, determined to prove himself, determined to run the clan, determined to beat the rest. And if the game was God, if the game was a fight against the West, against the presumptions of Western science, against his brother or Marcus Chalfen, he was determined to win it. (446-447)

Equating Millat's fundamentalism with a Mafioso-style ethos culled from the mythologies of western modernity is *White Teeth's* most risky proposition. Smith, however, does not solely attribute his radicalism to a testosterone fuelled gung ho-ness. Her narrator looks deeper into Millat's anger and reveals that his fundamentalism is also about readdressing the shame and injustices his father suffered when he first came to the UK. Millat wants to believe he has a "second generation attitude" and that, through his militancy, he will redress "the long, long history of us and them" (506). At first, these conflicting motivations can seem at best confusing and at the worst contrived. In the book's favour, Millat's sudden mood swings and internal milieu are "true to character" of the archetypal angry teenager who is attracted to rebellion and certain ideologies upon which they can channel this anger. Nonetheless, there are many things about the awkward denouement of *White Teeth* that do not ring true. Millat ends up trying to kill his own father at the official unveiling of "FutureMouse" (he is saved, for a second time, by his best friend Archie) and one is left wondering if Smith's contrived plot line of fundamentalism and hybridity is moreover put together to please a western audience that demands fresh narratives on multiculturalism rather than to illuminate upon the complexities of border existences.

The period of the late 1970s in the UK was marked by a vibrant inter-ethnic rapport between South Asians, Black Caribbeans, Africans, etc. The links between these communities were forged as a means to face down the overt and violent racism that was commonplace within urban centres. This united front became a place of refuge for many who were struggling to find their place in society that was still imbued in the arcane discourses of nationalism, and which had not as yet embraced multiculturalism. If we compared this cross-ethnic solidarity and activism of the late 70s with how ethnicities interact today, we find that this unity has been severely weakened. In today's Britain, multiculturalism has become an "accepted" reality amongst the majority of its citizens, and many people belonging to distinct ethnic



minority groups (many of whom reside in deprived inner city areas) show a tendency to retreat into insularity. It is perceived that there is no longer any “common cause” through which they can channel their concerns.

Manu Islam's *Burrow*, set in 1970s Britain, bears out this inter-ethnic rapport of the late 70s and furthermore shows how Islam resided within the private sphere of South Asian Muslim's lives (*Burrow* specifically deals with the Bangaldeshi community of East London). The novel traces the tribulations of Tapan Ali, a Bengali émigré who has landed in London's East End during the late 1970s. As an illegal immigrant, Tapan is constantly looking over his shoulder which leads to a subterranean existence and hence the book's title “Burrow”. He becomes prey to people of his own community; people like Poltu Khan who are suspected of tipping off Immigration on the whereabouts of illegal immigrants. Through Tapan's contact with the diasporan Bengali community, Islam introduces the reader to the day-to-day functionings of this community and what becomes immediately apparent is that the precepts of Islamic faith within the community, whilst conservative in their outlook, have not become politicised or radicalised. A point in hand is when Tapan visits Doctor Karamat, a local intellectual for whom Tapan is writing a column. Once inside the Doctor's apartment, *Burrow's* narrator observes: “At first he [Tapan] thought that the man [Doctor Karamat] followed a strict, austere interpretation of Islamic codes concerning representation. But he found it hard to believe since, among Bangaldeshi Muslims of his generation, this kind of rigidity was rare” (157). Tapan, while accepting the conservatism of the older generation of Bengalis, has a limited rapport with the community at large and prefers to seek out like-minded people, both from his own and other ethnic backgrounds. (One poignant example in *Burrow* is how comrade Moo Ya (a Chinese diasporan) helps rescue Tapan from the police during the battle of Brick Lane in the summer of '78.)

It is amongst these people that he feels most comfortable with; a people who understand his own sense of deracination. Despite all being “junkies for England” (161) they too are confused by the conflictual nature of their in-betweenness; they feel divorced from the ethics and behaviour of their parent's generation but are still searching for their place within British society. Although Tapan is an émigré, he identifies with this sentiment and confesses to Nilu (his girlfriend) that, “I've nothing to go back to Bangladesh for. It might sound funny, but –despite all the difficulties– I feel at home here [London]” (166). The reason why Tapan feels so much at home in London despite the obstacles that are put in his way is something that the novel suggests but never explicitly says. Tapan's romantic visions of “England” have been culled since his youth. His grandfather once gave Tapan a book on England which is described as “the most beautiful land on earth” (7). Much of London's appeal for Tapan lies in the cultural mix to which he is exposed to, a cosmopolitanism that excites his imagination. On the contrary, he distances himself from those people of his own community such as the Most Venerable Pir-Sahib who glibly assures that: “what the scientist fellows are propagating is full of fundamental flaws and mistaken notions. [...] A single verse of the Koran will debunk them a thousand times” (52). While for Tapan, Pir-Sahib represents that strain of scripturalism against which he must resist,



it is precisely these and other discourses of fundamentalism that lead to a radicalisation of certain elements of the South Asian Muslim community in times to come.

Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, while examining this radicalisation of Muslim diasporic communities in Britain, prefers to focus more on the intimate dramas and omit the larger context of jihad and the internationalising of radical Islam. Within the text women, struggle to liberate themselves from Islamic constraints present within a ghettoised diasporic community. These constraints can come from both a masculine surveillance of women's "morality" and from within the family fold where the mother/daughter relationship is seen as suffocating the female offspring. The text takes the latter as one of its narrative focuses and contextualises it through the complex relation between Mah-Jabin and her mother, Kaukab, a devoted Muslim. Kaukab personifies that migrant section of South Asians who feel both bewildered by and excluded from a society that upholds specific moral codes alien to their core religious beliefs. The nameless North of England setting of the novel is referred to as Dasht-e-Tanhaii, translated as both "The Wilderness of Solitude" and "The Desert of Loneliness", and this toponym captures, in a very visual way, the sense of isolation from white society that many South Asians suffer from. Thus, Dasht-e-Tanhaii becomes Aslam's microcosm of this diasporic experience and the author flags up the pernicious effects of this isolation; the community's obduracy in its enforcing of Islamic codes of conduct.

Mah-Jabin becomes victim of this intransigence and is sent off to Pakistan on her mother's insistence and against her own will at the age of sixteen, where she is married off to her cousin who mentally and physically abuses her. It is only years later, when Kaukab comes across a malicious letter from Mah-Jabin's ex-husband, that Kaukab comes to realise the hell her daughter has been through. This epiphany, however, comes too late and, while she commences to engage with the destructiveness of her own blinkered vision, her estrangement from her offspring is too complex for her to rationalise. Ironically, it is Mah-Jabin who most defends Kaukab against her brother Ujala's barrage: his accusations of her filiation with a religion that condones "amputations, stoning to death, flogging" (322); his rage against his mother's "ignorance". Mah-Jabin (who has experienced daily life in Pakistan) attempts to mitigate these shortcomings by contextualising her mother within a Pakistani socio-cultural context. Kaukab, however, refuses to see women's roles in Pakistan as being jaundiced, and it is this incommensurable vision that fuels the family rift.

The alternative model Aslam offers is through the figure of Shamas,<sup>19</sup> a non-believer whose flexibility becomes a bridge to his children who have unanimously rejected their mother's singular vision. Shamas is a prominent and respected member of community; however, despite his impeccable credentials, he does not escape the polarisation of a society that has become increasingly radical. A dramatic vehicle the narrative uses to contextualise this intransigence is the murder of a local couple

---

<sup>19</sup> Shamas draws certain parallels with Aslam's own father who was a communist, poet and film producer in Pakistan, but who had to struggle when the Aslam family moved to Huddersfield.



who have defied the strict Islamic mores imported from rural Pakistan and by living together outside marriage. Jungu, brother of Shamas, is one of the victims of this intolerance, and the brutal killing of him and Chanda becomes symbolic of the nefarious outcomes of a frustrated Islamic righteousness that aspires to impose its version of a *pensée unique*.

The supplementary tragedy of this violence is Kaukab's incapacity to engage with the sub-text of the killing; that these "crimes of honour" (Chanda has been murdered by her own brothers as part-retribution for her "unclean act") form a part of an extended practice, both in Pakistan and in the UK, of similar acts of violence in the name of Islam.<sup>20</sup> Emotionally, she is incapable of fully grieving the death of her beloved brother-in-law, as this comes into conflict with what her religious convictions dictate, and this isolates her both from her husband and her offspring and, ultimately, from herself. Her dictum: "Jugnu died because of the way he lived" expresses her generalised frustration at the rejection of Islam in her household in favour of secularism and of the openness with which things she considers taboo are discussed.<sup>21</sup>

This retreat into Islam and Kaukab's complete surrender to dogma becomes paradigmatic of a wider phenomenon that is occurring globally amongst sectors of Muslim communities. Apart from the anxieties that exclusion from society produces, Aslam offers an alternative reading of being blinkered from other realities through religion:

to exist within the world of grown-ups is to encounter pain and disappointment as well as joy and fulfilment. Every day friends fail us, lovers abandon us, we don't get the rewards we deserve, we make decisions that are wrong and then we have to live with the consequences of those mistakes. But turning to religion means we don't have to think anymore – we are told what to think, what to eat, what to wear, who to meet, who to talk to. (*Three Monkeys Online* July 2005)

Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, whilst contextualising this surrender to conservative interpretations of Islam within a ghettoised Pakistani community in the North of England, also transcends issues of Islamic faith and diasporic identity to embrace universal themes of rites of passage, love, abandonment, filial ruptures etc. Rather than essentialising notions of ethnicity, he composes a pastoral narrative structure that draws many of its motifs from classical Islamic and Indian subcontinental literature including the central leitmotif of the moth and the flame, or the Islamic concept of the search of the beloved – man's search for his lover as a motif of his soul seeking God.

Through his appropriation of an Islamic resource-base, Aslam is consciously revising current perceptions of Islam and opening up a much older and richer world of Muslim erudition which he coalesces with a world literature. This

---

<sup>20</sup> Islam, in an interview with Michael O'Connor, states that all the incidents depicted in *Maps* are based upon documented cases both in Pakistan and England. [http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/als\\_page2/\\_nadeem\\_aslam\\_interview.html](http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/als_page2/_nadeem_aslam_interview.html).

<sup>21</sup> She is shocked by her son's Charag's art which explores, in an explicit manner, themes of sexuality.



appropriation of his cultural heritage, positioned with a secular context, mirrors that of many writers, artists and intellectuals from the Indian subcontinent who profess a Muslim heritage. This positioning is the most visible within the British media and arts and is a strategy many second and third generation settlers have employed in their negotiation of a hybrid British identity. The flip side to this assimilation is a rejectionist and isolationist ethos fomented by an essentialised vision of Islam that feeds from anti-Western discourses of writers such as Sayyid Qutb<sup>22</sup> or even the bin Laden. A third positioning adopted by South Asian Muslim faith communities is constructed through a rejection of this oppositional ideology; they prefer to perceive Islam and the West as “interlocking narratives: interconnected, open politico-cultural systems that have learned and continue to learn from one another” (Appleton 177). It is this integrationist and dynamic Islam that perhaps needs to become more visible so as to diffuse the potential of society becoming ever more polarised as certain sections persist in their skewed notion that all Muslim faith values are contra secularism.

Reviews sent to author: 28 October 2014. Revised paper accepted for publication: 15 February 2015.



## WORKS CITED

- ABBAS, Tahir. “A Theory of Islamic Political Radicalism in Britain: Sociology, Theology and International Political Economy.” *Contemporary Islam* 1. 2 (August 2007): 109-122. Print.
- AHMAD, Imran. *Unimagined: A Muslim Boy Meets the West*. London: Aurum Press, 2007. Print.
- AHMED, Rehana. “Occluding Race in Selected Short Fiction by Hanif Kureishi.” *Wasafiri* 24. 2 (June 2009): 27-34. Print.
- ALI, Monica. *Brick Lane*. 2003. New York: Scribner, 2004. Print.
- ALIBHAI-BROWN, Yasmin. *Who Do We Think We Are? Imagining the New Britain*. Penguin Books: London, 2000. Print.
- . *Mixed Feelings: The Complex Lives of Mixed-Race Britons*. London: The Women’s Press, 2001. Print.

---

<sup>22</sup> Appleton (2005) displays how the “anti-Western” discourses of this radical Islam in fact were borrowed from Western sources such as anarchism considering the fact that they have no precedent in Islamic thought (178). In this respect he shows how, by being a product of a Western intellectual tradition, they are anti-Western but cannot be considered *non-Western*.



- APPLETON, Michael. "The Political attitudes of Muslims Studying at British Universities in the Post-9/11 World (Part 1)". *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 25. 2 (August 2005): 171-191. Print.
- ASLAM, Nadeem. *Maps For Lost Lovers*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2004. Print.
- BROWN, Malcom D. "Comparative Analysis of Mainstream Discourses, Media Narratives and representations of Islam in Britain and France Prior to 9/11". *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26. 3 (December 2006): 297-312. Print.
- CORMACK, Alistair. "Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*." *Contemporary Literature* 47. 4 (Winter 2006): 695-721. Print.
- FAROOQ, Mohammad Omar. "Partition of Indian and the Creation of Pakistan". July, 2001. [http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/other/azad/india\\_wins.htm](http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/other/azad/india_wins.htm). Web.
- FIELD, Clive. "Islamophobia in Contemporary Britain: The Evidence of the Opinion Polls 199-2006." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 18. 4 (October 2007): 447-477. Print.
- GILROY, Paul. *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- HAI, Yasmin. *The Making of Mr Hai's Daughter: Becoming British*. London: Virago Press, 2008. Print.
- HAMID, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. London: Penguin Books, 2007. Print.
- HOLMES, Frederick. "The Postcolonial Subject Divided between East and West: Kureishi's *The Black Album* as an Intertext of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*." *Paperson Language and Literature* 37. 3 (Summer 2001): 296-313. Print.
- JOHNSON, Chalmers. *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*. New York: Owl Books, 2000. Print.
- ISLAM, Manzu. *Burrow*. London: Peepal Tree, 2004. Print.
- KIBRIA, Zazli. "The 'New Islam' and Bangladeshi Youth in Britain and the US". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31. 2 (February 2008): 243-266. Print.
- KUNZRU, Hari. *The Impressionist*. 2002. London, Plume, 2003. Print.
- KUREISHI, Hanif. *The Black Album*. New York: Scribner, 1995. Print.
- "My Son The Fanatic". In Hanif Kureishi *In a Blue Time*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1997. Print.
- *My Ear at His Heart*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2004. Print.
- "Fear and Paranoia." *The Guardian* 5 April 2006. Print.
- LEWIS, Philip. "Only Connect: Can the Ulema Address the Crisis in the Transmission of Islam to a New Generation of South Asians in Britain?" *Contemporary South Asia* 15. 2 (June 2006): 165-180. Print.
- MAHER, Shiraz. "How I Escaped Islam." *The Sunday Times* 12 August 2007. Print.
- "Muslim Britain is Becoming One Big No-go Area." *The Sunday Times* 13 January 2008. Print.
- MCCABE, Colin. "Hanif Kureishi on London". *Critical Quarterly* 41.3 (Autumn 1999): 37-56. Print.
- MODOOD, Tariq, & Fauzia Ahmad. "British Muslim Perspectives on Multiculturalism". *Theory, Culture & Society* 24. 2 (2007): 187-213. Print.
- O'CONNOR, Michael. "Writing Against Terror—Nadeem Aslam." *Three Monkeys Online*, July 2005. [http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/als\\_page2/\\_nadeem\\_aslam\\_interview.html](http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/als_page2/_nadeem_aslam_interview.html). Web.
- PADAMSEE, Alex. "Uncertain Partitions: 'Undecidability' and the Urdu Short Story." *Wasafiri* 1. 23, Issue 1 (Winter 2008): 1-5. Print.



- RUSHDIE, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*. London: Picador, 1988. Print.
- SAID, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. 1993. London: Vintage, 1994. Print.
- SARDAR, Ziauddin. *Desperately Seeking Paradise*. London: Granta Publications. 2004. Print.
- SIAPERA, Eugenia. "Multiculturalism, Progressive Politics and British Islam Online." *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 2. 3 (February 2007): 331-346. Print.
- SMITH, Zadie. *White Teeth*. London: Penguin, 2000. Print.
- SURI, Sanjay. *Brideless in Wembley*. Penguin Books, India: New Delhi, 2006. Print.
- WALSH, Declan. "Times Square bomb: Inside the bomber's backyard." *The Guardian* 5 May 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/05/faisal-shahzad-terrorism-motives-puzzle>. Web.

