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**THE MYTH OF 9/11**

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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## Abstract

Conceptualisations of modern literary history are premised upon a series of dynastic successions, whereby one is able to trace, albeit simplistically, the evolution of the novel through its realist, modernist and postmodernist manifestations. Considered in this linear manner, the emergence of altered cultural movements is ordinarily attributed to a crisis within the former mood; as society ruptures and alters, existing modes of representation prove inadequate to reflect, or else engage with, the emergent structure of feeling. As an event with far-reaching implications, many critics and cultural commentators have attributed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 with the inception of an altered global mood. Moreover, in the days and weeks following 9/11, the publication of a number of articles penned by authors emphasised the extent to which the event had precipitated a profound crisis in representation. As an ever greater number of articles and studies emerged proclaiming the final death knell of postmodernism and the emergence of a more anxious global mood, so the myth of 9/11 quickly developed.

The thesis rests upon a very simple question: to what extent has 9/11 precipitated a change in the novel? Through examining a wide range of fictions published largely within Britain in the last fifteen years, the study explores and ultimately dispels the assumptions of the myth. Rather than examining the fictional representation of 9/11, the study's focus is on assessing the significance of the novel after the event, and moreover on interrogating the manner in which the terrorist attacks might have engendered a shift in the contemporary mood that is reflected in the subsequent novels published. Through emphasising the novelistic concerns and themes that transcend the assumed cultural rift, the thesis proposes that the 'post-9/11 mood' might more usefully be interpreted as an exacerbation of an already existing structure of feeling that responds to the banal superficiality of the postmodern condition.

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## Introduction: The Myth of 9/11

Myths [...] purport to relate one's experience to grand beginnings and ends.<sup>1</sup>

*On or about September 2001 Western culture changed. The change was sudden and definite, and since one need not be arbitrary, let us date it to September 11, 2001. The first signs of it are recorded in the newspaper articles penned by Western authors, Ian McEwan's 'Beyond Belief' in particular; their fictions continue to record it. In society one can see the change, if I may use a socio-cultural illustration, in the assumed responsibilities of the author. The pre-9/11, postmodern writer of fiction is an eclectic creator of alternate realities; playfully in and out of the literary tradition, now to borrow from modernism, now to pastiche and deconstruct 'reality'; the fictions exuberantly challenge conventions, and the author revels in his lack of mimetic responsibility. The post-9/11 writer lives like a leviathan at the forefront of the public consciousness; revelment ended, he is called upon to explain, and interpret faithfully, the incomprehensible reality of the emerging landscape; formal experimentation is discarded as mimesis is demanded by the reading public. All cultural relations have shifted – those between authors and society, fiction and reality, East and West. And when cultural relations change there is at the same time a change in perceptions of religion, conduct, politics and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about September 11, 2001.*

So might be envisaged the contemporary cultural mood: a period of transition precipitated by an event of such magnitude that the established tools of perception are unable to make comprehensible the emergent post-9/11 reality. Following the events of September 11, politicians and cultural commentators alike were quick to announce the inception of a new global era. In the days and weeks that followed, articles penned by novelists attempting to make sense of the new global reality, saturated the broadsheets. While many proclaimed an impending crisis within representation – what meaningful role could *fiction* have within a climate where *reality* had taken on a heightened potency? – that society turned to its authors as a means to decipher the events is significant, and seemingly imbues the writer with a social responsibility at

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.35

odds with his positioning as an agent of postmodern vacuity. Indeed, in demanding a clarity of perception beyond the grasp of mere mortals, the post-9/11 author is apotheosized, having been resurrected from his postmodern death.

For many such writers, the increased burden of expectation served to stifle creativity. Martin Amis is perhaps the most notable instance, temporarily abandoning a work in progress (*Yellow Dog* would later be published in 2003), and hyperbolically declaring that following 9/11, ‘all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change in occupation’<sup>2</sup> (a statement that, having itself been published, contains an inherent incongruity). That, however, the immediate response to the cultural impact of 9/11 is the instinctive proclamation that ‘things will never be the same again,’ may be just that: an *immediate* reaction, rather than a considered analysis documenting a *lasting* shift in the cultural mood. Indeed, written within such close proximity to the events of September 11, the rationale behind the respective claims is based upon little more than the *expectation* that an atrocity of such magnitude, played out before a horrified global audience, will invariably induce cultural change. With this in mind, it might be argued that such articles do not so much reflect the nuances of the emergent cultural mood, as they function to outline a series of expectations, which through being repeatedly reiterated, subsequently establish the myth of 9/11.

In assessing the extent to which the discourses of Orientalism both reflect and determine Orientalist ideology, Edward Said suggests that ‘there is a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advance by readers’ experiences.’ He gives the example of a book that gives details of how to deal with a fierce lion, and suggests that the publication of such a text would provoke other texts to be written that deal with similar subjects, such as ‘the fierceness of lions, the origins of fierceness and so forth.’ He goes on to argue that as the focus of the texts shift from general considerations of lions to more specific interrogations of their fierceness, the accumulation of studies subsequently reinforce and intensify perceptions of the ‘actual’ ferocity of a lion, ‘since that is what in essence we know or can *only* know about it.’<sup>3</sup> A similar dialectic of reinforcement appears to be evident regarding the myth of 9/11. Originating with the expectation

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The Voice of the Lonely Crowd’ in *The Guardian* (June 1, 2002)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jun/01/philosophy.society>> (accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1991; London: Penguin, 1995), p.94



that 9/11 precipitated a change in the cultural mood, each subsequent article, chapter and study that investigates the nature of the shift incited by 9/11, functions to reinforce the belief that such a transition occurred. Indeed, even if, like this study, there is a certain scepticism with regard to claims that the events of September 11 marked the inception of a new global era, that such a study is undertaken at all paradoxically fortifies the myth.

In exploring the nature of myth, Roland Barthes suggests that it ‘deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates.’<sup>4</sup> In a broad sense, such would seem to be the case with the mythologizing of 9/11. While there is a undeniably an argument to be made that much contemporary British fiction demonstrates a clear movement away from the postmodern literature of the late 1970s and 1980s, to equate the transition specifically with the movement from a pre-9/11 world to a post-9/11 one is far too reductive a formulation, which in its apparent eagerness to shift the focus of the events of September 11 from the realm of human tragedy to ideological demarcation, fundamentally fails to acknowledge recent literary history. Many of the motifs that are assumed to be indicative of the ‘new’ post-9/11 era are evident within the earlier fictional manifestations of the 1990s. That these tropes might be more readily recognisable within the literature of the new millennium is suggestive of the *intensification* of an already emergent shift, rather than the inception of a new cultural order.

To what extent, then, might the events of September 11, 2001 be thought to have provoked the inception of a new cultural mood? Moreover, to what degree has the myth of 9/11, in resituating the concerns evident within fiction published at the end of the twentieth century to the literature emerging from the ‘new’ post-9/11 climate, served to furnish contemporary culture with a false consciousness that effectively ‘evaporates’ recent (‘pre-9/11’) literary history? It is these questions to which this study is concerned. The following narrative is divided into five thematic chapters, that in offering literary analyses of a broad range of texts published primarily within the last fifteen years, offer an overview of some of the concerns manifested within both pre- and post-9/11 British fiction, and so function to destabilise the myth.

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers (1993; London: Vintage, 2000), p.151

As a means to gauge the cultural mood of the ‘pre-9/11’ era, Chapter 1 explores the British postmodern tradition. I highlight the problems in defining postmodernism (in seeking to define the term, one inevitably privileges certain critical and theoretical perspectives over others, and thus inhibits the assumed liberalism and multiplicity of postmodernism proper), and argue that used extensively, even banally, within the cultural lexicon, the signifier ‘postmodern’ is attributed with a sense of meaning that is ultimately reductive, formulaic and as such, fundamentally non-postmodern. Drawing on the theories of Fredric Jameson, I suggest that in attempting to define postmodernism, an understanding of the term (which will always be incomplete) can only be reached once the movement has run its course. With this in mind, the chapter begins by exploring postmodernism through the consideration of two recent studies (Ian Gregson’s *Postmodern Literature* and Steven Connor’s edited collection *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*), rather than through ‘traditional’ postmodern examinations of the term. I further offer an overview of the styles, themes and motifs of the British Postmodern Tradition (a term that will require glossing), contrasting the ‘traditional’ postmodernism of John Fowles, B.S. Johnson and the early literature of Salman Rushdie and Martin Amis, with the more commercially postmodern fiction of the ‘New Postmodernists’, whose knowing engagement with the theories and motifs of literary postmodernism emphasises the extent to which the term has saturated the contemporary cultural lexicon, and so become normative.

Chapter 2 offers an overview of some of the cultural concerns attributed to the emergent post-9/11 structure of feeling. As a means to highlight the discrepancies between the projected myth of 9/11 and the subsequent literature published, I offer analyses of examples of ‘post-9/11’ fiction alongside considerations of some of the journalistic articles written within the aftermath of September 11. Moreover, in positioning Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* as an urtext, I explore the extent to which the novel anticipates the post-9/11 mood. Examining the prevalent concerns of the novel, I provide a reading of the text that is used to both emphasise the continuation of theme within the pre- and post-9/11 context, and further to explore the distinction between the narratives of fiction and those of disaster. Indeed, such a dialectical model provides a framework from which the mythologized claims attesting to the crisis in literature can be explored.

Drawing from DeLillo's prognosis that 'the future belongs to crowds', chapter 3 interrogates the nature of subjectivity and its fictional representation within the post-9/11 environment. The chapter is divided into two sections that interrogate the post-9/11 myth attesting to the inception of a revitalised humanism. Through readings of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, Amis's *Money* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, I explore posthuman constructions of subjectivity, as means to interrogate the conception of 'species consciousness', a term which seemingly possesses an increased potency within the post-9/11 climate. While there is evidence within much contemporary fiction of the apparent resurgence of an 'ancient human universal', I argue that such a focus on human solidarity is a trope that is not specific to post-9/11 literature; rather, as the textual analyses suggest, the contemporary manifestation of species consciousness might be thought of as an exacerbation of existing concerns engaging with and reacting against the anonymity and (social) dislocation of the postmodern subject. The second half of the chapter explores the nature of urban subjectivity. I offer an extensive reading of Jon McGregor's novel *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, which, drawing on the postmodern theories of cognitive mapping as outlined by Fredric Jameson and Kevin Lynch, highlights both the continued alienation of the contemporary subject and the anonymity of urban existence. I further argue, however, that the means through which the individual within McGregor's text locates himself suggests a development of the principles of cognitive mapping; rather than creating a map which locates the individual spatially to the environment, the novel emphasises the importance of *social* location. Moreover, the novel suggests an alternative manner in which the existence of the self can be validated, in the form of 'urban archiving' – a theme which McGregor further explores in his second novel, *So Many Ways to Begin*.

Chapter 4 examines the post-9/11 myth of the demonization of the Muslim. I offer analyses of pre- and post-9/11 fiction – primarily Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* and *My Son the Fanatic*, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Martin Amis's 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* – and argue that the assumed post-9/11 'Othering' of the Muslim might be better conceived as the reinvigoration of already existing concerns. Indeed, in outlining the progression of the post-migrant and 'new' post-migrant tradition (that, which like the 'new postmodern tradition', draws upon and knowingly exploits the tropes and motifs of the earlier tradition), it becomes possible to trace the forms of characterisation

thought to be representative of the post-9/11 mood back to earlier fictional manifestations. Moreover, I note that while the character of the Islamic fundamentalist irrefutably features more prominently within fiction published after 9/11, the nuances of its construction can be located firmly within the post-migrant tradition. In this sense, as in keeping with the mythologizing of 9/11, we might argue that the perceived fictional ‘Othering’ of the Muslim is based more upon an expected response, rather than anything more substantive. I offer a reading of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* that explores the problems inherent to representing ‘real’ communities within fiction. In situating the novel within the continuing framework of the new post-migrant tradition, I argue that much of the criticism levelled at Ali’s ‘shameful’ portrayal of the British-Muslim community derives not so much from its specific form of characterisation – which itself can be traced back to earlier fictional portrayals within the tradition – but rather is generated in response to the *expected* vilification of Muslim communities following the events of 9/11.

The concluding chapter 5 offers readings of Zadie Smith’s three novels and a selection of her critical essays, readdressing the recurring theme featured in all: namely, the contemporary resurgence of ‘species consciousness’, or rather, the need to ‘connect’. Through readings of her novels I argue that much contemporary fiction (significantly, not limited to those texts published after 9/11) is suggestive of the need for a revitalised form of humanism, which has as its basis the ideologies outlined and explored by Forster. Indeed, I suggest that the remedy to our fractured (post)postmodern society might be realised in the reworking of the Forsterian belief of a ‘multiplicity-in-unity’, which might subsequently enable the emergence of a truly global consciousness. It is perhaps this apparent revision of humanist philosophies that will come to be thought of as the defining characteristic of contemporary British literature.

# 1. Defining the Postmodern Moment

## 1.1 Naming the System: Looking Back at Postmodernism

I occasionally get just as tired of the slogan of ‘postmodernism’ as anyone else, but when I am tempted to regret my complicity with it, to deplore its misuses and its notoriety, and to conclude with some reluctance that it raised more problems than it solves, I find myself pausing to wonder whether any other concept can dramatize the issue in quite so effective and economical a fashion. “We have to name the system”: this high point of the Sixties finds an unexpected revival in the postmodernism debate.<sup>5</sup>

As one of the resounding cultural markers of the twentieth century, it is ironic that the many diverse and conflicting arguments surrounding postmodernism have, in many instances, overshadowed the actual term itself. Within contemporary culture, postmodernism has become something of a portmanteau term; it is so overloaded with meaning, to the point of near implosion, that it has become almost meaningless. As noted by Lloyd Spencer, ‘inherently vague, ambiguous and slippery,’ the term postmodernism is ‘continually used in conflicting and even contradictory ways. Even when this confusion is acknowledged, there seems to be no obvious way out of the maze – and no route back to a simpler, clear view of the intellectual landscape.’<sup>6</sup> Indeed, even if a level of specificity is applied to the term, it remains notoriously difficult to define. Discussing the use of the term within literary debates, Linda Hutcheon questions its socio-cultural value, and suggests that having ‘been bandied about in artistic circles since the 1960s,’ postmodernism has been ‘most often used too generally and vaguely to be very useful, encompassing things as diverse as Susan Sontag’s camp, Leslie Fiedler’s pop and Ihab Hassan’s literature of silence.’<sup>7</sup> As a term that continues to elude definition, a semantic shape-shifter that is simultaneously too specific to designate an historical moment and not specific enough to reflect the

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<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Marxism and Postmodernism’ in *New Left Review*, NLR1.176 (July/August 1989), p.45

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd Spencer, ‘Postmodernism, Modernity and the Tradition of Dissent’ in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim (London: Routledge, 2001) p. 160

<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.10

nuances of post-war culture, the usefulness of the term within contemporary discourse is clearly debateable.

Perry Anderson has commented of Fredric Jameson that ‘no other writer has produced as searching or comprehensive a theory of the cultural, socio-economic and geo-political dimensions of the postmodern.’<sup>8</sup> Certainly Jameson’s culturally enveloping study, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)<sup>9</sup> is set apart from many other contemporary debates surrounding the concept, as his consideration of postmodernism resolutely refuses to fall comfortably into designated categories. While other critics have argued that the term’s inherent vagueness prevents any meaningful discussion of it from taking place, Jameson’s study is structured around its very heterogeneity, and in an essentially ‘postmodernist’ self-reflexive manner, he offers a definition of the term that appeals to a multitude of divergent disciplines. For Jameson, the phenomenon of postmodernism cannot be defined solely through aesthetic, epistemological or historical means. Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of the term cannot be formulated through a consideration of its manifestation within any one of the categories; an examination of postmodern aesthetics, for instance, would no doubt raise some interesting concerns, yet, considered in isolation, the emergent definition would invariably be incomplete. Rather, Jameson suggests that due to its (ambiguous) prevalence throughout the discourses of contemporary Western society, postmodernism might best be conceived as the ‘cultural dominant’ of late twentieth-century thought:

One of the most striking features of the postmodern is the way in which in it, a whole range of tendential analyses of hitherto very different kinds – economic forecasts, marketing studies, cultural critiques, new therapies, the (generally official) jeremiad about drugs or permissiveness, reviews of art shows or national film festivals, religious “revivals” or cults – have all coalesced into a new discursive genre, which we might as well call “postmodernism theory”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Perry Anderson, ‘Foreword’ to *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, Fredric Jameson (London, Verso, 1998), p.xi

<sup>9</sup> Jameson’s study has as its genesis his 1984 essay (published in *The New Left Review*) of the same name.

<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991; London, Verso, 1999), p.x

In outlining his hypothesis of postmodernism as a cultural dominant, Jameson emphasises the fallaciousness of defining cultural moments through chronological means. To argue that the term is synonymous with a particular moment in history (generally accepted as the post-war period onwards), is at once to affirm its totalising homogeneity, and to necessarily disregard the nuances of the period under a collective banner of 'postmodernism'. In contrast, in positioning postmodernism as a cultural dominant, Jameson is able to formulate an understanding of the term 'which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features.'<sup>11</sup>

While Jameson's positioning of postmodernism as a cultural dominant allows for the recognition of the residual and emergent cultural forms that, in permeating the contemporary moment prevent the reductionism intrinsic to processes of periodisation, conceptualisations of modern literary history remain premised upon dynastic succession; hence one is able to chart, albeit simplistically, the chronological progression of the modern Western novel through the hegemonic, and problematically generic, manifestations of realism, modernism and postmodernism. Considered in this way, the evolution of modern literature can be thought to follow a linear path, whereby each new cultural movement is at once a reaction to, and crucially a continuation of, its predecessor. We might argue that the emergence of new or racially altered cultural movements occurs primarily as a result of a crisis within the current mood; the suggestion being that as society ruptures and alters, existing cultural forms are thrown into crisis as they prove inadequate to the task of meditating upon the emergent environment. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx attests that 'men

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.4

Such an approach would seem ideal in capturing the inherent heterogeneity of the term, yet in his critique of Jameson's Marxist approach to postmodernism, which focuses on his engagement with the term as conceived within the original essay, Douglas Kellner considers whether the formulation of the term might better be 'conceptualised as an "emergent" form of culture which appears dominant in certain groups and certain sectors but which is not yet a dominant for any society as a whole' ('Introduction: Jameson, Marxism, and Postmodernism' in *Postmodernism, Jameson, Critique*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Washington DC: Mouton de Gruyter Press, 1989), p.29) To conclude that postmodernism *dominates* contemporary society, however, would appear to be a fundamental misreading of Jameson's account; moreover, writing his analysis of Jameson's approach in 1989, it is difficult to conceive how postmodernism might, at this relatively late stage in its development, be envisaged as an 'emergent' form. While postmodernism might broadly be thought of as hegemonic within late-capitalist society – its movement from a concern specific to academic discourse to its banal manifestation within popular culture, suggests the extent to which it has been naturalised – it would be inaccurate to conclude from such an understanding of the term that all cultural forms of the post-war period are necessarily 'postmodern'. Rather, within Jameson's account, postmodernism is conceived as 'the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses – what Raymond Williams has usefully termed "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production – must make their way' (Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.6).

make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, within his model, dominant literary movements are thought not to be created spontaneously, but rather are formulated by the socio-cultural implications of residual and emergent historical moments. Literature is here, then, understood to be inextricably determined by historical and social forces, and thus cultural periodisation emerges as an inescapable, if undesirable, consequence.

An event with global implications, many critics have attributed the events of 9/11 with the resounding death knell of postmodernism, and the subsequent emergence of a new cultural mood. With the claims of Virginia Woolf's diagnosis of a new cultural era reverberating within the contemporary environment, there was a resounding sense that, in gauging the incomprehensibility of the emergent reality, the tools of the postmodern generation were 'useless for the next';<sup>13</sup> indeed, there was an increasing awareness that the anti-foundational philosophies of postmodernism had left individuals ill-equipped to negotiate the complexities of the emergent post-9/11 landscape, where reality had taken on a heightened potency. As Josh Toth and Neil Brooks argue, a post-9/11 culture 'demanding a shared sense of "moral outrage" doesn't seem reconcilable with a sustained rejection of metanarratives and a demand for stylistic experimentation. So, indeed, if postmodernism became terminally ill sometime in the late-eighties and early-nineties, it was buried once and for all in the rubble of the World Trade Center.'<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically, although the tools of postmodernism are ineffective in assessing the impenetrable nuances of the emergent landscape, in order to acquire a working understanding of 'postmodernism', one must first possess the relevant perceptual and cognitive skills indicative of postmodern thought. It might be argued, then, that a grasp of the intricacies of postmodernism can only be achieved once the movement has run its full course, and has significantly impacted upon the social realm so as to have become normative. In considering the difficulties of imposing a coherent definition upon the term, Jameson suggests that 'postmodernism is not something we can settle once and for all and then use it with a clear conscience. The concept, if there is one, has to come at the end, and not at the

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), p.595

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Character in Fiction' in *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p.48

<sup>14</sup> Josh Toth & Neil Brooks, 'Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?' in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. Neil Brooks & Josh Toth (New York: Rodopi, 2007), p.3



beginning of our discussions of it.’<sup>15</sup> In seeking to define postmodernism, one must be temporally disassociated from it, and thus if, within contemporary culture the pervasive influence of postmodernism has waned, a useful departure in attempts to define the tradition might be found with a consideration of recent, rather than actual ‘postmodern’ examinations of the term. The argument follows that the formulation of a cogent understanding of the phenomenon inevitably demands that one looks back on the tradition from the vantage point of a post-postmodern climate. Such a temporal distancing, while extricating analysts from the postmodern mire that had previously restricted contemporaneous examinations of the term, does not, however, guarantee an uncomplicated engagement with the term; the complex and contradictory manifestations of postmodernism ensure that definitions will always be conceived with a heavy conscience.

In his introduction to *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson describes ‘postmodernism theory’ as ‘the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not sure there is so coherent a thing as an “age”, or zeitgeist or “system” or “current situation” any longer’<sup>16</sup>, thereby highlighting the perpetual problem facing the postmodern cultural critic: namely, how to engage with postmodernism without resorting to established narratives that may ultimately serve to undermine understandings of the term; or, in other words, how to define postmodernism without actually imposing a definition upon it. Moreover, if the postmodern moment, as proposed by Jean-François Lyotard, is synonymous with the delegitimation of the metanarrative, any written account attempting to define it is deemed, through its very authoritative form, to be reductive and thus distinctly ‘unpostmodern’. As Edmund J. Smyth notes in his introduction to *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (1991), ‘critics are inevitably caught in a kind of double bind when the analysis of postmodernism takes place: in providing a version of postmodernism which rightly emphasizes plurality, multiplicity and mobility, one is valorising certain critical concepts at the expense of others.’<sup>17</sup> This is a dilemma which both Ian Gregson and Steven Connor, in their 2004 studies *Postmodern Literature* and *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* respectively, are only too aware of; both being keen to offer coherent

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<sup>15</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. xxii

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.xi

<sup>17</sup> Edmund J. Smyth, ‘Introduction’ to *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Edmund J. Smyth (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1991), pp.14-15

understandings of postmodernism which simultaneously take into account, and indeed preserve, the contradictory and ever-shifting complexities of the term. The extent to which their respective studies achieve this seemingly impossible task – the creation of a non-authoritative narrative that at once captures the essence of the postmodern without assigning it a specific socio-cultural signifier – attests to the volatile nature of postmodernism itself.

Gregson's *Postmodern Literature* constitutes one text within a larger series that is 'premised upon a concept of literary history which depends upon a necessary simplification that divides history into distinct periods, so that those periods are made to seem self-contained and internally consistent.'<sup>18</sup> While the need to understand the evolution of culture as a series of dynastic successions is nothing new, it is certainly problematic.<sup>19</sup> This particular series, with such titles as Gail Marshall's *Victorian Fiction* and Steven Matthews' *Modernism*, presents an essentially restrictive chronology of modern literature that serves to limit specific texts to their historical moment; and while such studies are careful to highlight the variety of texts that emerge within the period, their overriding classification as examples of either 'modernist fiction' or 'Victorian fiction' leaves a resounding sense of homogenisation. As such, an understanding of culture emerges where textual production is seen to be wholly dependent upon a series of established ideological and philosophical moments, and thus the evolutionary nature of cultural production is all but overlooked. Moreover, such reductive formulations of history, which govern the majority of 'companion' series, rest upon this curious assumption of epochal consistency. Such notions of historical-reductionism are immediately problematic to a consideration of postmodernism, since in periodising the postmodern moment, concepts of plurality and difference, which one might argue are 'characteristic' of the phenomenon, are immediately transcended by notions of homogeneity and conformity.<sup>20</sup>

While acknowledging such concerns, it is difficult to imagine how a formulation of modern literary history might be generated without resorting to such

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<sup>18</sup> Ian Gregson, *Postmodern Literature* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2004), p.xiii

<sup>19</sup> Brian Richardson's article 'Remapping the Present: The Master Narrative of Modern Literary History and the Lost Forms of Twentieth-Century Fiction' in *Twentieth Century Literature* 43.3 (1997), pp.291-309, offers an interesting exploration into the issues emerging from such literary/cultural categorisations.

<sup>20</sup> Although, of course, in discussing the 'characteristics' of postmodernism, one instantly imbues the term with a prescriptive specificity that undermines its diversity.

reductive categories. Indeed, in discussing postmodernism at all, the assumption is made that a coherent definition of the term exists; thus while we may want to argue for its implicit heterogeneity, our formulation of the term serves only to reinforce its fundamental homogeneity. This is a factor which Gregson is quick to acknowledge and, despite the generalising implications of its title, he emphasises the potential of his study to provide an analysis of the literature of the postmodern period which is free from such formulaic restrictions. In his preface, Gregson asserts that it is ‘overridingly important’ to ‘oppose the insidious process that implies that only [...] postmodernists like John Ashbery, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth *et al* deserve to be discussed in books and courses dedicated to the postmodern period.’ The engagement with such a narrow corpus of texts, he argues, leads to the understanding of postmodernism as a generic label, whereby specific writers, by virtue of the form and style of the texts they produce, are deemed more ‘postmodern’ than others. This results in the construction of a postmodern hierarchy, whereby those figures whose texts seemingly adhere to the prescribed blueprint of postmodern literature are championed over other writers who deviate from the tradition. Jeanette Winterson is cited as a ‘conspicuous beneficiary’ of this particular process, with Gregson arguing that ‘she has achieved a prominence which is dependent upon her conforming to abstract notions of what this type of fiction should be.’<sup>21</sup> As the concerns of postmodernism move from academic to popular discourse, however, it is difficult to conceive how such a process might be avoidable. Indeed, as will be explored later in this chapter, the commodification of postmodernism that seemingly occurs as its concerns shift from academic to popular discourses, ensures that its tropes are instantly recognisable under a prescribed ‘postmodern’ formula.

In entitling his study *Postmodern Literature*, it is moreover difficult to see how Gregson might challenge such an ‘insidious process’; indeed, in choosing to discuss specific texts over others, a clear hierarchy is established whereby authors are omitted from the corpus if they are not postmodern enough or, in the case of the aforementioned writers, are too conventionally postmodern. Moreover, Gregson highlights an associated problem faced by critics assessing postmodern literature: that of the ‘tendency to postmodernise less postmodernist authors and ignore the extent to

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<sup>21</sup> Ian Gregson, *Postmodern Literature*, p.xv

which they are at odds with the theory.<sup>22</sup> This statement, rife with contradiction and paradox, seems to argue that one is deemed a postmodern author merely if one writes within the postmodern period, but also if one adheres to the conventions and theories of postmodernism. For Gregson, then, there are varying degrees of postmodernism.<sup>23</sup> authors might be categorised as ‘postmodern’ simply by virtue of the fact that they are writing within the timescale normally attributed to the postmodern period; but will be elevated within the hierarchy to über-postmodernists should their fictions allude to the intricacies of postmodern theory, or more generally adhere to the conventions of the postmodern tradition (although such texts are presumably redolent of the formulaic engagement with postmodernism, of which Winterson’s novels are accused). Gregson here appears to be restricted by his own criterion, for he at once chastises those generic formulations of postmodernism that situate writers along a postmodern continuum, yet simultaneously reaffirms the existence of such an understanding by referring to the ‘less postmodernist authors’ of the period. Despite being written outside of the immediate ‘postmodern’ context,<sup>24</sup> in its attempts to define the nuances of postmodernism, Gregson’s narrative becomes increasingly entangled and limited by the myriad complexities of the term that had hindered previous examinations of it. One might conversely argue, however, that the unavoidable inconsistencies and contradictions that permeate the narrative of *Postmodern Literature* presents the perfect, ironic encapsulation of postmodernism itself.

Also part of a larger series exploring the distinct stages of modern literary history, Steven Connor further addresses and challenges the problem of postmodern exhaustion in his edited collection *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, a series of ten essays which propose an (re-)examination of late capitalist culture.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Edmund J. Smyth outlines a similarly dualistic conception of postmodernism in his introduction to *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*. He argues that the designator ‘postmodern’ is used broadly to describe a specific cultural moment, which, generally speaking, is thought to proceed modernism. This understanding of the term positions postmodernism as a periodising marker, which in an attempt to ‘name the system’, homogenises the complexities of the post-war climate within a recognisable, but generic, category. In its second instance, the term is used to describe a series of *specific* styles and motifs found within the experimental writing emerging within the post-war, or rather postmodern, period. For Smyth the motifs of ‘fragmentation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, plurality, metafictionality, heterogeneity, intertextuality, decentring, dislocation [and] ludism’ are all characteristic of the postmodern style (Introduction’ to *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, p.9).

<sup>24</sup> The study’s appended ‘timeline of key events and publications’ specifies a timescale that stretches from the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, to the publication of Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* in 1998 (Ian Gregson, *Postmodern Literature*, pp.173-178).

While the text is prefaced with a useful chronology highlighting significant dates within the postmodern period – which in this case spans the period from India’s independence in 1947 to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 – postmodernism is not here understood to be an epoch, but rather a cultural and philosophical ‘disposition’ which shows a remarkable capacity to evolve and renew itself; although one may want to argue that its inclusion in such a series in fact only *reinforces* the conception of postmodernism as epochal marker. This aside, however, the understanding of postmodernism as a concept vulnerable to historical and ideological inconsistencies, provides a framework which is central to the collection as a whole. As with *Postmodern Literature*, while the study serves primarily as an introductory guide to postmodernism, the variety of essays included prevents it from offering a single, coherent understanding of the term.

In his introduction to the collection, Connor implements a four-tiered framework to decipher the chronological progression of postmodernism, thus highlighting its apparent propensity to evolve. The first stage, which extends through the 1970s to the early 1980s, is characterised by ‘accumulation’. During this period,

the hypothesis of postmodernism was under development on a number of different fronts. Daniel Bell and Jean Baudrillard were offering new accounts of consumer society, Jean-François Lyotard was formulating his views about the waning of metanarratives, Charles Jencks was issuing his powerful manifestos on behalf of architectural postmodernism and Ihab Hassan was characterizing a new sensibility in postwar writing.<sup>25</sup>

Connor suggests that during this initial phase, postmodernism was considered to be ‘a genuine puzzle’, with the emergent, and indeed diverse, interpretations of the term refusing to fuse into a coherent whole. Postmodernism was here, then, discipline-specific (perhaps ‘theorist-specific’ might be a more accurate term). During the late 1980s, Connor notes, these disjointed accounts begin to accumulate, and while they were unable to form an unproblematic, uniform whole, studies emerged which were increasingly more culturally enveloping; in its attempt to bind together various disparate understandings of the term, Fredric Jameson’s essay ‘The Cultural Logic of

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<sup>25</sup> Steven Connor, ‘Introduction’ to *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.1-2

Late Capitalism' can perhaps be considered such a study. Arguably, the effect of these texts was to initiate the second phase of its evolution: 'synthesis'. Connor argues that 'by the beginning of the 1990s, the concept of the "postmodern" was ceasing to be used principally in the analysis of particular objects or cultural areas and had become a general horizon or hypothesis.'<sup>26</sup> To illustrate the effect of this particular phase Connor recalls how as an enthusiastic child-astronomer, he was told that the best way to capture the depth of colour of a faint star was to focus his vision to the side of it, rather than directly on its centre. Similarly, he contends that during the second stage of its maturation, 'spotters of the postmodern' favour such a decentred approach:

If one wanted to pin down the postmodernist features of some unlikely object of analysis – war, say, or prostitution, or circus – the thing to do was to look directly not at your target but at what lay in its periphery. Postmodernism was the practice of critical distraction (literally being "drawn aside"). [...] It evoked a horizontal lattice-work of connections between different postmodernisms, rather than a discontinuous series of "vertical" diagnoses of specific postmodernisms.<sup>27</sup>

Blurring the clearly marked delineations that characterised the initial phase, within the second phase of its development the discipline-specific manifestations of postmodernism slowly began to dissipate, as individual concerns began to fuse, forming a broader structure of feeling. As a logical conclusion of this second stage, Connor suggests that 'by the middle of the 1990s, a third stage had evolved: 'autonomy'. As the "post" idea had achieved a kind of autonomy from its objects [...] no longer a form of cultural barometer, postmodernism had itself become an entire climate.' He suggests that the vast accumulation of texts engaging with postmodernism served to qualify its undeniable existence, and thus within this phase, the reality of postmodernism was confirmed through 'idiom rather than actuality';<sup>28</sup> as will be explored in subsequent chapters, such might also be the case with the myth of 9/11.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp.2-3

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.4

Its fate perhaps intimated throughout the second phase and resolutely confirmed through the third, during the final decade of the twentieth century, Connor suggests that postmodernism enters its fourth (and final?) stage, ‘dissipation’:

[T]he idea of the postmodern began for the first time to slow its rate of expansion during the 1990s. In this decade, “postmodernism” slowly but inexorably ceased to be a condition of things in the world, whether the world of art, culture, economics, politics, religion, or war, and became a philosophical disposition, an all-too-easily recognizable (and increasingly dismissable [sic]) style of thought and talk. By this time, “postmodernism” had also entered the popular lexicon to signify a loose, sometimes dangerously loose relativism.

For Connor, it is the sense of ‘loose relativism’ that defines the immediate ‘pre-9/11’ cultural moment. He argues that within academic discourse, the specificity of the term had dissipated to such an extent that ‘its dominant associations were with postcolonialism, multiculturalism and identity politics’, while within the popular lexicon, the term had become so overdetermined as to essentially mean nothing; ‘it had shrunk down into a casual term of abuse.’<sup>29</sup> It is, then, presumably this ubiquitous, yet exhausted conception of postmodernism that critics have argued the post-9/11 cultural climate reacts against.

Offering much more than a retrospective glance back at the postmodern moment, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* seeks to subvert this framework and instead return a sense of specificity to (the tired) contemporary considerations of postmodernism. Unlike other studies that present predictable, although often valuable, interpretations of postmodernism through the obligatory analyses of various artistic mediums (how many anthologies come to mind with such chapter headings as ‘Postmodernism and Literature’, ‘Postmodernism and Film’, ‘Postmodernism and Architecture’, etc?),<sup>30</sup> in this collection of essays, Connor

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.5

<sup>30</sup> The oxymoronic figure of the postmodern traditionalist will not, however, be disappointed with the inclusion of the standard essays on ‘Postmodernism and Philosophy’, ‘Postmodernism and Film’, ‘Postmodernism and Literature’ and ‘Postmodernism and Art: Postmodernism Now and Again’, all of which essentially revisit ideas, albeit interestingly, that have been explored elsewhere; one may argue, however, that this sense of predictability, or theoretical *déjà vu*, is an unavoidable consequence of the ‘companion’ sub-genre. Indeed, while these texts succeed in presenting original readings of cultural objects – Catherine Constable’s analysis of *Face/Off* is particularly effective in this respect – they ultimately add nothing new to the debate. Postmodernism is here presented as a concept so deeply ingrained within our culture that any significant questioning of it is met with indifference. Theories of

seemingly advances the postmodern debate by drawing together analyses that engage with disciplines, such as law, religion, science and technology, that have been previously neglected by the traditional companion book.<sup>31</sup>

Philippa Berry's essay 'Postmodernism and Post-Religion' is perhaps the most successful included in the collection, and certainly has a resonance within the assumed culturally bifurcated post-9/11 climate. Forming her argument in the shadows of the works of a number of postmodern theorists, Berry explores the nature of religious belief within the postmodern period. Seemingly arguing against the absolutism that is intrinsic to Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern age (namely, an increasing scepticism toward any form of totalising grand narrative), Berry suggests that far from deconstructing the metanarratives of religious dogma, the inception of postmodernism as a cultural dominant might conversely reinvigorate orthodox notions of religion. Drawing from the poststructuralism of Jacques Derrida, and specifically his essay 'Faith and Knowledge', Berry suggests that the 'exaggerated secularism' that might be thought to define contemporary Western society, 'is invisibly bound to and attracted by its purported opposite or antithesis.' Hence, the apparent secularism that defines contemporary society should not be interpreted as the logical conclusion of Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern condition; rather, somewhat paradoxically, Western society is perceived as being secular precisely because it simultaneously embraces its antithesis, in the form of religious absolutism. Berry notes that such a notion has an increased resonance within the post-9/11 climate, where 'the recent acceleration of postmodern culture has coincided with the often violent revival of fundamentalist religious attitudes.'<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in challenging claims that 'traditional conceptions of knowledge and religion appear increasingly redundant in the context of a postmodern pluralism',<sup>33</sup> she instead argues

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the postmodern are, in these particular essays, merely recounted and very rarely challenged. Despite Connor's hypothesising in his introduction that postmodernism 'must nearly be at an end' (p.1), these essays, in their acknowledgement of the continued naturalisation of the postmodern, fail to share his pseudo-apocalyptic vision.

<sup>31</sup> Ursula K. Heise's 'Science, Technology and Postmodernism' considers the impact that scientific knowledge has had on shaping the new 'technological age' (pp.136-167); Robert Eaglestone's 'Postmodernism and Ethics Against the Metaphysics of Comprehension' draws on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and examines the extent to which ethical concerns are central to the continuing postmodern debate (pp.182-195); and Costas Douzinas' 'Law and Justice in Postmodernity', explores postmodern jurisprudence as a means to redefine understandings of justice, questioning its relevance to the contemporary world (pp.196-223).

<sup>32</sup> Philippa Berry, 'Postmodernism and Post-Religion' in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, p.170

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp.168-169



that the very plurality of the postmodern condition enables revitalised forms of religious belief to emerge. In keeping with the contradictory and shifting nature of postmodernism, having constructed an antithetical model (secularism/religious absolutism) to illustrate contemporary notions of faith, Berry undermines and complicates the dialectic by arguing that the anti-foundationalism of postmodern society enables the emergence of a number of more nebulous positions, which both draw from and repudiate the assumptions of both secularism and religious orthodoxy. For Berry, contemporary culture is haunted by the spectre of post-religion, ‘something like yet unlike religion’, which assumes ‘manifold different forms’<sup>34</sup> (perhaps akin to Lyotard’s notion of the postmodern proliferation of *petite recits*).

The premise of Berry’s argument, and indeed the structure it takes (drawing extensively from the ‘postmodern’ narratives of de Certeau, Derrida, Baudrillard and others), is broadly representative of those essays featured in the latter half of Connor’s collection, which collectively attempt to damper the death knell of postmodernism that resonates throughout socio-cultural discourse, and instead propose the continued significance, and indeed specificity, of the term into the new millennium. Such examinations suggest that postmodernism, far from being ‘buried under the rubble of the World Trade Center’, enters a new phase within the contemporary moment, yet whether the accumulative voices of Connor, Berry, Heise, *et al* can remain audible over the multitudinous roar of the postmodern detractors is debateable. Writing in 2000 of the then current theoretical trends of postmodern analysis, T.J. Clark, comments that ‘the valedictory, hard-headed, anti-denunciatory, “own-up-to-the-power-of-the-image” tone of much writing on postmodernism [...] would be easier to warm to if it were not so decidedly a realism after the event.’<sup>35</sup> As acknowledged by Connor, and made explicit through the tensions evoked by Gregson’s study, postmodernism has long since broken out of the academy and has saturated every crevice of contemporary society; so much so that, as a skateboard-wielding tortoise suggests in a recent advertisement for *Coca-Cola*, any object or attitude thought to capture the zeitgeist of the contemporary age is cursorily dubbed ‘postmodern’. As such, Connor’s attempts to rejuvenate exhausted conceptions of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.173

<sup>35</sup> T.J. Clark, ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’ in *New Left Review* (March-April 2000) <<http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2231>> (accessed 04.07.07)

the term may well come to nothing, as the concept continues to lose any specificity that it may once have possessed and instead exists as a portmanteau term that can essentially be applied to describe *any* cultural manifestation emerging within the post-war period. Moreover, evolving or degenerating depending upon perspective into an all-embracing ‘climate’ devoid of cultural specificity, postmodernism seemingly transcends boundaries of nation, and instead becomes an entirely global phenomenon. Tracing the specific nuances of the British Postmodern tradition, then, becomes an increasingly perplexing task.

## 1.2 Dropping the Postmodern Baton? Locating the British Tradition

The development of the cultural forms of postmodernism may be said to be the first specifically North American global style.<sup>36</sup>

We live in an age in which style is more than national, and when comparable historical pressures shape form in many countries.<sup>37</sup>

Exploring the various manifestations of the term in his study *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson interrupts his narrative early on to ‘remind the reader of the obvious’: that ‘this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world.’<sup>38</sup> Such a claim, attesting to the apparent globalisation of a profoundly American phenomenon, is clearly problematic on a number of levels, not least because it implies the global omniscience of North-American ideologies. Indeed, placing the origins of postmodernism firmly at the feet of American culture, would suggest that any cultural manifestation of the movement outside of this geographical boundary would merely be an imitation, or rather pastiche, of postmodernism proper. When attempting to locate the postmodern tradition within a British context then, one is faced with an immediate problem: if traces of postmodernism are located, to what extent do they

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<sup>36</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.xx

<sup>37</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, Introduction to *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p.14

<sup>38</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.5

constitute a *British* tradition? That is, do such manifestations of postmodernism have the contextual determinism to stand alone as a defined British tradition, or are they only reflections of, and thus subservient to, the American encapsulation? Is postmodernism really a ‘global style’, or is it merely an all-American export?

Much of the focus on the various literary manifestations of postmodernism has undeniably been placed on the American tradition, with British fiction lurking in the shadows of its erstwhile inferior. Commenting upon the apparent transatlantic shift of the literary canon, Malcolm Bradbury suggests that the ‘relative neglect’ of British fiction, as experienced since the 1950s, is concurrent with Britain’s declining position in the world:

When the era began, American literature was still perceived as a branch of British literature, and not until the post-war period did it come to be seen as equivalent or dominant. The idea that the novel – and above all the English novel – is dead has had a great deal of recent currency.<sup>39</sup>

Bradbury goes on to observe that ‘the war had massively curtailed Britain’s role as the great imperial power, and as part of the wartime Anglo-American alliance Churchill had had to accept the prospect of retreat from empire.’<sup>40</sup> Such a socio-political shift would clearly impact upon the cultural realm, and with the dominance of the much-revered British Empire waning, it is perhaps a logical conclusion that the influence of its fiction would suffer a similar outcome. The great Empire now fragmenting, the geographical and ideological isolation of Britain from America (and indeed Europe) became ever more prominent; its literature emerging as increasingly parochial:

The view that the English novel was provincial in relation to the European (especially Russian and French) tradition had long been current, if not universally agreed. Now in addition there was concern that American post-war novelists [...] were not merely much more energetic and ambitious than their

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<sup>39</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel: 1878-2001*, p.xv

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p.257

English counterparts but also technically superior and aesthetically more self-aware.<sup>41</sup>

One could argue that the belief in the aesthetic domination of the American novel over its irrelevant English equivalent, continues to be validated beyond the immediate post-war period. Certainly, as far as accounts of postmodernism are concerned, it is the figure of the American novelist who provides the richest source of material. Even British accounts of postmodern fiction, such as that included in Tim Woods' culturally enveloping *Beginning Postmodernism* (1999) show a preference, bordering towards exclusivity, towards American authors. Keen to emphasise the heterogeneity of the post-war moment, Woods chronicles the evolution of postmodern literary forms:

First, there was the fiction of writers like Federman and John Barth. Then the term 'postmodern' gradually moved during the 1970s and early 1980s to describe those works which also embodied within them explicit fiction like that of the later Pynchon, DeLillo and Paul Auster. More recently, it has been applied to fiction which reflects the social ethos of late capitalism, like cyberpunk sci-fi and the so-called 'brat-pack' writers like Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney.<sup>42</sup>

Such accounts reinforce the proposal that it is the *American* experience which determines and defines the postmodern moment, and go some way to revise statements, such as those outlined by Jameson and Bradbury, that attest to postmodernism's global reach.

The exclusive emphasis upon the American manifestation of postmodernism, while yielding a rich discussion, is clearly misleading, since it fails to reflect the influence of the plethora of non-American figures whose works have contributed greatly to the postmodern debate. Woods himself ostensibly recompenses for this in the remaining sections of his study, which include discussions that are far more culturally diverse, and which consequently suggest an understanding of postmodernism that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. Indeed, in his chapter 'Postmodernism: Philosophy and Cultural Theory', Woods highlights a series

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<sup>41</sup> Stuart Laing, 'Novels and the Novel' in *Society and Literature: 1945-1970*, ed. Alan Sinfield (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers Inc, 1983), p.255

<sup>42</sup> Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p.52

of works that have, unquestionably, contributed to the postmodern debate: Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (which interestingly, in later editions, includes a foreword contributed by Jameson himself); various writings, including *Simulations* and *Seduction*, by Jean Baudrillard; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*; Jürgen Habermas' 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project; inevitably, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; and so on. Clearly, the American/European balance is here subverted, but interestingly, the significance of any British contributions – Woods refers to the studies of Terry Eagleton, David Harvey, Alex Callinicos, and Christopher Norris, to name a few – are instantly undermined as, segregated from the leading postmodern theorists as detailed above, they are collectively categorised under the dubious heading, 'Adversaries of Postmodernism.'<sup>43</sup> The problematics of identifying a (distinct) British tradition are again, then, highlighted, and the assumption is clearly made that British treatments of postmodernism fall into two distinct categories: either pieces that are condemnatory in their reaction to the phenomenon; or manifestations that exhibit an encapsulation of postmodernism that is at best a pastiche, and at worst an inferior imitation that warrants no place in such debates. Either way, both categories suggest a 'tradition' that has its foundations firmly rooted in foreign inspirations.

As Randall Stevenson makes clear in his essay 'Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction in Britain', however, such an acknowledgement need not serve to undermine the existence of a British postmodern tradition. In fact, an awareness of the hybrid construction of the phenomenon can, paradoxically, serve to reinforce its inclusion in British literary debates. Investigating the case to validate the existence of a British postmodern tradition, Stevenson remarks that 'it is only occasionally, as in the case of Fowles or Durrell, for example, that postmodernism has generated the kind of respect and popularity enjoyed by authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Italo Calvino and Gabriel García Márquez.'<sup>44</sup> Proposing that the success of Pynchon *et al* has contributed to the oxymoronic conceptualisation of 'British Postmodernism', he goes on to suggest that, indicative of this view is the belief that 'the baton of innovation [...] may not have been altogether dropped, but sometimes has to be carried by another team before the British outfit can continue its own rather erratic

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp.32-33

<sup>44</sup> Randall Stevenson, 'Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction in Britain' in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, p.31

course down the tracks of literary history.’<sup>45</sup> As a means to counter-attack such claims, however, Stevenson suggests that ‘the tendency to look abroad for inspiration is not new,’<sup>46</sup> and, using John Fowles’ novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) to illustrate his point, exposes how an exploitation of this awareness justifies the inclusion of British fiction into the global postmodern debate.

Set against an affected backdrop of Victorian England, the novel follows Charles Smithson, a young Englishman who, in order to pursue his increasing obsession with the eponymous protagonist, defies the orthodoxies of middle-class etiquette by breaking off his engagement with Ernestina Freeman, the facile daughter of a wealthy tradesman. Rumoured to have been seduced and subsequently abandoned by a French naval officer, Sarah Woodruff is ostracised by the pious Lyme Regis society, who, in watching her perpetually gaze out to sea hoping to catch the return of her former lover, refer to her either as ‘Tragedy’ or the more disparaging ‘French Lieutenant’s Woman’. Key to Stevenson’s argument is the significance to the novel of its projected image of Sarah staring out to sea. The relevance of the image to interpretations of the subsequent narrative is reinforced by the positioning of the first stanza of Thomas Hardy’s poem ‘The Riddle’ as epigraph to the novel’s opening chapter: ‘Solely out there / Did her gaze rest, / Never elsewhere / Seemed charm to be.’<sup>47</sup>

What follows in the first chapter, is a picturesque panoramic description of Lyme Bay, as might be seen through the eyes of ‘the local spy.’<sup>48</sup> Observing the movements of a young couple walking along the Cobb<sup>49</sup>, the ‘eye in the telescope’ is able to depict the minutiae that collectively serve to determine the novel’s historical and social setting:

...perched over the netted chignon, one of the impertinent little ‘pork-pie’ hats with a delicate tuft of egret plumes at the side – a millinery style that the resident ladies of Lyme would not dare to wear for at least another year; while the taller man, impeccably in a light grey, with his top hat held in his free hand,

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.32

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Hardy, ‘The Riddle’ in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), p.448, ll.6-9

<sup>48</sup> John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1996; London: Vintage 2004), p.10

<sup>49</sup> Significantly, the location of the novel’s opening instantly draws parallels to earlier literary texts; the Cobb being the location in which Louisa Musgrove fell in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1818).

had severely reduced his dundrearies, which the arbiters of the best English male fashion had declared a shade vulgar – that is, risible to the foreigner – a year or two previously (pp.10-11).

While the image conveyed is effective in establishing the novel's Victorian sensibility, the detail of the narrative indicates something which extends beyond aesthetic commentary. Indeed, one might suggest that the text hints towards a self-awareness of the precarious state of British fiction. The nature of the assumed gap between the parochial British novel and the innovative fictions emerging from Europe and America, is reflected in the gentleman's outdated styling etiquette: dundrearies being declared only 'a shade vulgar' by English authorities, are 'risible to the foreigner.' Such a reading gains further momentum as the 'local spy' continues to cast his view over the bay:

But where the telescopist would have been more at sea himself was with the other figure on that sombre, curving mole. It stood right at the seawardmost end, apparently leaning against an old cannon-barrel up-ended as a bollard. Its clothes were black. The wind moved them, but the figure stood motionless, staring, staring out to sea, more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day (p.11).

Replicating and reappropriating the image projected by Hardy's 'The Riddle', the mysterious portrait of Sarah standing motionless, staring out over the sea towards an unreachable ideal, is clearly central to the plot of the novel. Stevenson, however, further questions whether this image might in fact be more metaphorical and self-aware. Could it not be, he argues, that 'her desires might be seen as figurative of more general feelings among postmodernist British authors, seeking inspiration and affection less often to be found within their own shores'?<sup>50</sup> Certainly, as will be explored later, the manner in which *The French Lieutenant's Woman* knowingly engages with and pastiches the assumptions of Victorian society, is key to the extent to which it questions the continued relevance of the dominant styles and forms of the British novel. In assessing the literature published during the post-war period, Bradbury argues that 'British fiction was not willing to let humanism, fictional

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<sup>50</sup> Randall Stevenson, 'Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction in Britain' in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, p.32

character and a sense of common reality go easily.’<sup>51</sup> Such self-reflexivity, as demonstrated by *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, however, suggests a clear shift towards novelistic forms that are willing to question their formal and stylistic boundaries. The narrative voice recounts how the Victorians had ‘sensed that current accounts of the world were inadequate; that they had allowed their windows on reality to become smeared by convention, religion, social stagnation’ (p.52). The novel itself might be conceived as being a response to such concerns.

### 1.3 Hesitation at the Crossroads: the ‘Problematic’ Novel

Long novels written today are perhaps a contradiction: the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time, each of which goes along its own trajectory and immediately disappears.<sup>52</sup>

To many the 1960s signified a period of great social and cultural transition, a shift perhaps encapsulated most saliently by Philip Larkin’s ‘Annus Mirabilis’ (‘Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three’<sup>53</sup>). As ‘the Beat and Hippie movements of the Fifties became the “counter-culture” of a whole new generation,’ there was an increased urgency for ‘new freedoms: peace, no arms, race, sex, music, drugs, free speech, obscenity, nakedness, revolution, pleasure, trips, instant Utopia, instant revelation.’<sup>54</sup> The entire social fabric was shifting, and a sense of public unease, no doubt in response to the defining events of the decade (the war in Vietnam, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the student revolts of 1968), was felt globally. Clearly, such a change in mood translated to a profound shift in cultural practices, as, with the proclamations of Woolf echoing, current modes of representation were deemed no longer appropriate to reflect the emergent complexities of the new reality. Andrzej Gasiorek argues that ‘for many writers, realism was proving inadequate to the task of confronting the post-war world.’<sup>55</sup> Indeed, as society became increasingly

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<sup>51</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel: 1878-2001*, p.376

<sup>52</sup> Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, tr. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1998), p.8

<sup>53</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Annus Mirabilis’ in *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p.167

<sup>54</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel: 1878-2001*, p.364

<sup>55</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p.6



disjointed, the totalising outlook of the ‘traditional’ realist novel was challenged, allowing for the emergence of more self-reflexive and interrogative forms.

Such a shift is certainly evident within the emergent fiction of the American tradition where, during this decade texts such as Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) reflected, through their innovative styles and narrative forms, the increasing unease and apparent fragmentation of the social fabric. The success of these and similar novels in questioning the very nature of reality itself, however, served to highlight the growing distinction between the American and British postmodern tradition. While the literary scene of the former was thriving, the latter was reportedly stuck in an archaic rut; a view that was later confirmed by the rejuvenated *Granta* magazine – then edited by Bill Buford – which recorded that ‘British fiction was never more parochial, a tiny parish with its own rules, boundaries and unremitting class preoccupations – while, at the same time, in the USA and Latin America, a great postmodern experiment was flourishing.’<sup>56</sup> While the texts of the, broadly American, postmodern tradition were seen to be representative of a period of great fictional experimentation, the assumption that such texts mark postmodernism’s fatal attack on realist modes is largely erroneous. Realism does not necessarily end with postmodernism; rather it undergoes an ontological shift, which allows for a far more fluid understanding of the concept. The boundaries of realism itself become blurred, allowing for various levels of mimesis, and it is precisely the acknowledgement of such a transition that enables one to approach and establish the nuances of the British postmodern tradition.

In her essay ‘Discourse, Power, Ideology: Humanism and Postmodernism’, Linda Hutcheon explores the apparent crisis that has befallen literary realism, and asserts that ‘the literary history of the novel has been inseparable from that of realism. Today, many want to claim that realism has failed as a method of novelistic representation because life now is just too horrific or too absurd.’<sup>57</sup> The assumed crisis in representation observed by Hutcheon parallels the claims outlined by Gasiorek attesting to the need, felt by British authors, to transcend realist modes of representation in order to reflect the concerns of the emergent landscape; and while

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<sup>56</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel: 1878-2001*, p.439

<sup>57</sup> Linda Hutcheon, ‘Discourse, Power, Ideology: Humanism and Postmodernism’ in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, p.107

such claims seemingly echo the concerns of earlier moments of transition in the cultural mood, in relying upon an understanding of ‘realism’ that is universally recognisable and thus presumably unified and static, both Hutcheon and Gasiorek’s arguments are inherently problematic. Indeed, as noted by Amy J. Elias:

When critics talk about the origins of British Realism, they refer primarily to mid-Victorian fiction written between 1845 and 1880. Most critics identify at least some of the four characteristics of this Realism: choice of typical subjects in a mimetic mode; authorial objectivity; the doctrine of natural causality contributing to character motivation; and a particular attitude toward the world that is seen as true.<sup>58</sup>

Texts such as Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, however, whilst still retaining aspects of ‘traditional’ realism, playfully exploit such conventions, and as such, suggest a progression of mimetic form, rather than a complete rejection of it, as Hutcheon and Gasiorek’s pronouncements would seem to imply. It is perhaps this progression, and questioning of forms, which might rightly be deemed ‘postmodern’.

Gasiorek suggests that with the apparent reappraisal of ‘realism’, there is a need to view the novel as ‘a heterogeneous and mutable genre, which undermines its earlier forms in an ongoing search for new ways of engaging with a historically changing social reality.’<sup>59</sup> The transition seen in postmodernism, then, from ‘traditional’ forms of realism to more inward looking and interrogative models (a trope that, as explored in the following chapters, also features predominantly within the speculative fiction of the contemporary moment) should not be seen as designating a crisis within the form of the genre itself; but rather, as a demonstration of the novel’s capability to evolve into new socially relevant forms. It is here useful to consider Brian McHale’s distinction between modernist and postmodernist literary forms. For McHale, both modernist and postmodernist novels are fundamentally realist. What distinguishes them as either examples of modernist or postmodernist fiction is primarily the differing manner in which they engage with reality. He suggests that, broadly speaking, the modernist novel utilises epistemological techniques: ‘Modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground

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<sup>58</sup> Amy J. Elias, ‘Meta-Mimesis?: The Problem of British Postmodern Realism in *British Postmodern Fiction*, ed. Theo D’haen & Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), p.10

<sup>59</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, p.6

questions such as [...] “How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?”<sup>60</sup> By contrast, he argues that the approach of the postmodernist novel is largely ontological:

Postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like [...] “Which world is this? What is to be done with it? Which of my selves is to do it?” Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? [...] What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?<sup>61</sup>

The postmodernist text, then, can arguably be referred to as ontologically mimetic; rather than offering a repudiation of reality, it questions how the concept is actually formed, and explores the modes of representation that are most suited to portray and interrogate it. Key to McHale’s argument, however, is the sense of overlap that defines modernist and postmodernist forms. Rather than offering a clear distinction between the forms, he argues that ‘the *dominant*’ of modernist fiction is epistemological, and ‘the *dominant*’ of postmodernist, ontological.<sup>62</sup> In inserting the modifier into his definitions, McHale envisages the transition from modernist to postmodernist forms as being defined by a simultaneous rupturing and continuation of style and approach. While there is a marked shift in the manner in which postmodernist texts engage with reality, the emergent fictions demonstrate not so much an explicit repudiation of modernist styles and techniques, but rather signal the modification of residual literary tropes, adapted to better reflect the concerns and complexities of the newly altered reality. For McHale, literature is conceived within an ongoing, although continually shifting, tradition, whereby the styles and forms of the past are constantly revised and reused within the present.

The ontological dominant of the postmodern novel is further examined in David Lodge’s essay ‘The Novelist at the Crossroads.’<sup>63</sup> Written in 1971, Lodge suggests that a useful image in thinking about the status of the then contemporary

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<sup>60</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.9

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p.10

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, pp.9-10 [my italics]

<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, Zadie Smith reappropriates Lodge’s model in her essay ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, which is explored in the conclusion to this study.

novelist is of a figure standing at a crossroads. As tradition dictates, he imagines that ‘the road on which he stands (I am thinking primarily of the English novelist) is the realistic novel, the compromise between fictional and empirical modes.’<sup>64</sup> Aware of the alleged delegitimation of realism endemic to the postmodern era, Lodge suggests the existence of two alternative directions. He contends that:

Realistic novels continue to be written – it is easy to forget that most novels published in England still fall within this category – but the pressure of scepticism on the aesthetic and epistemological premises of literary realism is now so intense that many novelists, instead of marching confidently straight ahead, are at least considering the two routes that branch off in opposite directions from the crossroads. One of these routes leads to the non-fiction novel, and the other to [...] ‘fabulation’.<sup>65</sup>

What is crucial to Lodge’s formulation, and that which links his construction of the ongoing literary tradition with McHale’s later rendering, is that the two alternative branches of non-fiction and fabulation are seen as inextricably bound to the realist tradition; effective splinter groups, they demonstrate the progression, rather than rejection, of realist conventions. While the construction of the figurative crossroad is ostensibly complete, Lodge adds a further, profoundly postmodern, possibility: hesitation, and the subsequent development of the ‘problematic’ novel:

The novelist who has any kind of self-awareness must at least hesitate at the crossroads; and the solution many novelists have chosen in their dilemma is to *build their hesitation into the novel itself*. To the novel, the non-fiction novel, and the fabulation, we must add a fourth category: the novel which exploits more than one of these modes without fully committing itself to any, the novel-about-itself [...] In the kind of novel I am thinking of [...] the reality principle is never allowed to lapse entirely – indeed, it is often invoked, in the spirit of the non-fiction novel, to expose the artificiality of conventional realistic illusion.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> David Lodge, ‘The Novelist at the Crossroads’ in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, p.100

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, pp.101-102

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, pp.105-106

It might be suggested that *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in its playful questioning of traditional novelistic forms, is an exemplar of the 'problematic' novel. Indeed, the text, while ostensibly conforming to realist conventions in its portrayal of an epic Victorian love story, provokes a second, more allegorical reading, which explores the self-referential nature of the novel.

In his 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel', Fowles details his objectives for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

I write memoranda to myself about the book I'm on. On this one: *You are not trying to write something one of the Victorian novelists forgot to write; but perhaps something one of them failed to write. And: Remember the etymology of the word. A novel is something new. It must have relevance to the writer's now – so don't ever pretend you live in 1867; or make sure the reader knows it's a pretence.*<sup>67</sup>

This pretence is made explicit throughout the text, which might be thought of as a pastiche of Victorian literature, rather than an imitative example of it. That the text is set in 1867 is unquestionable, but the realisation that knowledge of the past is always mediated by the present is made explicit throughout the narrative. As Jameson comments, 'the historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes "pop history").'<sup>68</sup> Clearly, however, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* suggests more than just a delegitimation of objective 'History', and as such, confirms its status as a 'problematic' rather than 'historical' novel. The text knowingly plays with the boundaries of history, often employing anachronism to emphasise the constructed nature of it; Fowles, for instance, in his opening description of the Cobb, remarks that the landscape is 'as full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore' (p.10), an English sculptor broadly contemporaneous with Fowles. The novel, as Fowles suggests, is a 'pretence'; it is fully aware of its status as a fictional document, and as such, interrogates and subverts conventions of the traditional realist form and its engagement with history.

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<sup>67</sup> John Fowles, 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel' in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury, p.138

<sup>68</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.25

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is most successful, and certainly most interesting from a postmodern perspective, in the way that it serves to establish, and thus reinforce, realist conventions, only to then challenge and subvert them. The novel is narrated by an omnipotent Author-figure, with a tendency to interrupt the narrative with 'factual' material, usually in the form of footnotes. This practice is effective in achieving two realist outcomes: firstly, it serves to validate the text's claim to realism by firmly grounding it within factual 'truth'; and secondly, it reinforces the authority of the 'Author-God'<sup>69</sup>. There are, however, other authorial interruptions embedded within the text that suggest a dissension from traditional realist conventions, and further serve to emphasise the fictionality of history. When describing the character traits of Charles, for instance, Fowles – or rather, the Author figure – reflects on his nature not through the framework of a Victorian setting, but rather through a contemporary one. He notes that 'though Charles liked to think of himself as a scientific young man and would probably not have been too surprised had news reached him out of the future of an aeroplane, the jet engine, television, radar: what *would* have astounded him was the changed attitude to time itself' (p.17). Through using (post)modern analogies to gain a better grasp of his character, the musings of the Author figure serve, once more, to highlight the deconstruction of history as objective truth.

The authority of the omniscient Author is challenged throughout the text, which at once reinforces authorial objectivity, only to subvert it later. Indeed, prior to the much-analysed thirteenth chapter, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* ostensibly conforms to traditional realist techniques in its representation of a 'choice of typical subjects in a mimetic mode'.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, such characters are represented as wholly malleable, with their fates being determined by the Author himself. As Sarah stands at her window towards the end of the twelfth chapter, for instance, the Author interjects, reassuring the reader that he will 'not make her teeter on the window-sill; or sway forward, and then collapse sobbing back on to the worn carpet of her room' (p.96). Such authority is, however, immediately undermined by the metafictional reflections outlined in the proceeding chapter. Remarking that he writes within a period where the Author, as omnipotent creator, has been delegitimised ('I live in the

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<sup>69</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music Text*, tr. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.146

<sup>70</sup> Amy J. Elias, 'Meta-Mimesis?: The Problem of British Postmodern Realism in *British Postmodern Fiction*, p.10

age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes', p.97), the narrator questions his assumed omniscience and suggests that his grip on the fate of his characters is not as firm as the reader might expect:

To be free myself, I must give [Charles], and Tina, and Sarah, even the abominable Mrs Poultney, their freedoms as well. There is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist. And I must conform to that definition. [...] I would have you share my own sense that I do not fully control these creatures of my mind, any more than you control – however hard you try, however much of a latter-day Mrs Poultney you may be – your children, colleagues, friends or even yourself (pp.98-99).

Reflecting Barthesian theory, the author is here presented as a medium, a mere communicator of events: for the narrative voice, 'the author is never more than the instance writing.'<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the independence of the characters from the confines of the Author's determining pen, is alluded to earlier in the novel, where a brief interjection locates specific personae in a 'reality' external to the text. The narrator comments how 'Mary's great-great-granddaughter, who is twenty-two years old this month I write in, much resembles her ancestor; and her face is known over the entire world, for she is one of the more celebrated younger English film actresses' (p.78).

The rupturing of the narrative frame, resulting from the metafictional digression outlined in chapter thirteen (the insertion of which prevents the text's ultimate question – 'Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?' (p.96) – being answered), reinforces the novel's status as a work of postmodern fiction. Indeed, as Gasiorek suggests, in breaking the façade of the Victorian realist framework, the text implies that 'it portrays nineteenth-century life in order to examine not only Victorian society as mediated by its literature but also the nature of fictional representation as it appears from a post-war perspective.'<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the rupturing of the realist fictional frame reoccurs later in the novel, when Fowles himself enters the text. Described as 'the prophet-bearded man' (p.388), the author scrutinises the sleeping Charles at length on a train journey. Recounting to the reader the intensity of his gaze, which was 'positively cannibalistic', Fowles comments that

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<sup>71</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music Text*, p.145

<sup>72</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, p.13

‘there is only one profession that gives that particular look, with its bizarre blend of the inquisitive and the magistral; of the ironic and the soliciting.’ Indeed, the specificity of Fowles’ insertion into the text, and indeed the dilemma that he outlines, has obvious parallels with Woolf’s assessment of realist traditions within her essay ‘Character in Fiction’. Just as Woolf observes Mrs Brown on a train journey and considers the extent to which her portrayal as a fictional character would be inhibited by the conventions of the Edwardian novel, so too Fowles explores the extent to which Charles’s fate, as determined by his being a character in a ‘Victorian’ novel, would inevitably be dictated by the traditional conventions of realist fiction:

Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles, is [...] what the devil am I going to do with you? I have already thought of ending Charles’s career here and now; leaving him for eternity on his way to London. But the conventions of Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, inconclusive ending; and I preached earlier of the freedom characters must be given (p.389).

Distinctly metafictional, this passage is perhaps more problematic than the Author’s musings as outlined in chapter thirteen. For while the characters are presented as possessing an element of autonomy, as creations of the Author figure, their fate is ultimately determined by *his* will: ‘what the devil am I going to do with you?’ This conflict is not adequately resolved by the text’s three alternative endings, as although an element of choice is given, Fowles recognises that ‘the second [ending] will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the “real” version’ (p.390). Conversely, however, one might want to question such claims, particularly since they are made by a figure whose entrance into the world of the text exposes him as a fictional creation. In a final subversion of realist traditions, then, the Author is stripped of all objectivity as he himself becomes subject to the concerns of postmodern ontology.

Also published in 1969, B.S. Johnson’s novel *The Unfortunates* offers a further, seemingly more experimental, reappraisal of traditional realist conventions. The text follows Johnson on an assignment in Nottingham to report on a local football



match.<sup>73</sup> Struck by the familiarity of the landscape as he arrives, it immediately becomes apparent that the city is defined in his mind by the memories of his cancer-stricken friend Tony; indeed the remainder of the text consists largely of individual, and inevitably disconnected, accounts of Johnson's memories. While the narrative itself is compelling, the physical form of the text itself is frequently where interest in the novel lies. Consisting as a series of twenty seven unbound chapters that can, with the exception of the 'First' and 'Last' sections, be read in any order, the novel offers the perfect encapsulation of Barthes' theory as outlined in 'The Death of the Author': the 'text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.'<sup>74</sup> Despite its fragmented form, however, the novel retains authorial omnipotence through the designation of the first and last sections. Indeed, in his introduction to the revised edition of *The Unfortunates* (1999), Jonathan Coe makes reference to Johnson's desire to 'exert absolute authorial control over his material.'<sup>75</sup> Certainly, the existence of these (framing) sections as predetermined, prevents the novel from being left entirely open to readerly interpretation. Moreover, although the reader is invited to read the twenty-five intermediary sections in any order s/he chooses, once read, a logical chronology can quickly be deciphered, which further places a limit on the text, and reinforces authorial omnipotence.

The ruptured form of novel above all serves as a physical reflection of the nature of existence itself. As Coe observes, having acquainted himself with the works of Sterne, Joyce and Beckett, Johnson's 'allegiances were fixed: the primary task of the novel, as he saw it, was to interrogate itself, to draw attention to its own artifice, and any writers who saw it merely as a vehicle for linear storytelling were kidding themselves.'<sup>76</sup> Moreover, as a means to reflect and interrogate the nuances of the new, fragmented social 'reality' of the 1960s, the unified form of the 'traditional' realist novel emerges as wholly inappropriate. A salient passage in *The Unfortunates* reads: 'For [Tony] it was too much to believe that there was no reason, not for me, it is all chaos, I accept that as the state of the world, of things, of the human condition, yes, meaningless it is, pointless.'<sup>77</sup> For such a chaotic, disordered society, the realist novel – which functions in part by manipulating 'reality' in order to project a

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<sup>73</sup> As Coe notes in his introduction to the novel, at this point in his career, Johnson was supplementing his income by working as a football reporter for *The Observer*.

<sup>74</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music Text*, p.148

<sup>75</sup> Jonathan Coe, Introduction to *The Unfortunates*, B.S. Johnson (London: Picador, 1999), p.x

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p.vi

<sup>77</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, 'Just as it seemed things were going his way', p.3

uniform, linear and entirely cohesive representation of it – clearly has no place. Indeed, Johnson argues that following Joyce, there is, in British literature, no place for the replication of such realist models: ‘No matter how good the writers are who now attempt it [...] it cannot be made to work for our time, and the writing of it is anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, and perverse.’<sup>78</sup>

Disrupting linear, chronological time and instead presenting a narrative that is wholly fragmented and disjointed, *The Unfortunates* reflects the nature of human consciousness and, more specifically memory. Indeed, from the outset of the text, the unreliability and non-linear functioning of memory is made explicit. As he arrives in Nottingham and encounters a barrage of visual signs provoking the sudden emergence of a residual memory, the narrator struggles to comprehend how, on being given the assignment, he had not made the connection between the physical city and his own relationship to it, sooner:

But I know this city! [...] How did I not realize when he said, Go and do City this week, that it was this city? [...] Covered courtyard, taxis, take a taxi, always a taxi in a strange city, but no, I know this city! The mind circles, at random, does not remember, from one moment to another, other things interpose themselves, the mind’s...<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, the fragmented nature of the text is clearly not limited to its physical form. The narratives contained within each individual section are themselves characterised by disjointed and incomplete sentence structures. Ideas are randomly interposed into the text, momentarily disrupting the linear order as the memories projected provoke further recollections or musings. For instance:

...perhaps he was not going to recover, he had successfully kept from them what it was, until then, though they knew it was very serious, but not that serious, he had kept it from them, what nature of deception is that, I wonder, what are the morals of that? I should try to work that out some time, I should try to understand. His father, yes, walking, his greenhouse, the flowers, prizewinner he was, they were, but, Ah, he said to me...<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> B.S. Johnson, cited in Jonathan Coe’s Introduction to *The Unfortunates*, pp.vi-vii

<sup>79</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, ‘First’, p.1

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, ‘So he came to his parents at Brighton’, p.1

Although it is possible to organise the twenty-five pamphlets into a logical order that reflects a systematic chronology, the fragmented nature of the text contained within each individual section suggests a refusal to conform to the conventions of traditional linear narratives, and thus emphasises the fundamental limitations of the realist form in reflecting the complexities of contemporary existence. Certainly, the form of Johnson's narrative has much in common with the modernist stream-of-consciousness technique. Woolf usefully outlines the characteristics of the method in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) when, standing in front of her painter's easel, Lily Briscoe critiques her troublesome work in progress: 'Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron.'<sup>81</sup> Likewise, the stream-of-consciousness technique should produce a narrative where the fluidity of the text allows for the overlapping and melting together of multiple ideas, while, on the surface, projecting the image of a coherent whole. *The Unfortunates* clearly embraces this process, but it additionally exploits, and thus, heightens its effect. Indeed, the novel presents an intensified version of the stream-of-consciousness method, modified to more thoroughly reflect the frenetic functioning and inherent unreliability of memory. The steady progression of thought embodied through the figurative 'stream,' where a series of ideas gently flow into one another, is here replaced by the churning, disorientating fury of a river's rapids: thought is thrown back and forth, and the 'bolts of iron' slowly loosen.

This embracing, and subsequent revision of modernist techniques aligns itself usefully with McHale's questioning of the designator 'post' in postmodernism:

'Postmodernist'? The term does not even make sense. For if 'modern' means 'pertaining to the present', then 'post-modern' can only mean 'pertaining to the future', and in that case what could postmodernist fiction be except fiction that has not yet been written? Either the term is a solecism, or this 'post' does not mean what the dictionary tells us it ought to mean, but only functions as an intensifier.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1999), p.231

<sup>82</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p.4

Unlike the manifestations of the modernist stream-of-consciousness technique seen in the novels of Woolf, *The Unfortunates* continually emphasises the unreliability of memory as purveyor of ‘truth’. The narrative voice, for instance, is aware that over time, memory can become distorted: ‘the past is always to be sentimentalized.’<sup>83</sup> Moreover, there is a realisation that interpretations of the past will inescapably be mediated through later events. In effectively reconstructing him in the text through the accretion of individual memories, Johnson recognises that the projected image of Tony will only ever be a falsified reconstruction, mediated by the defining memory of his premature death: ‘the fact of his death influences every memory of everything connected with him.’<sup>84</sup> (p.1). The past, then, is presented as subjectively determined and as such is never universally ‘true’<sup>85</sup>:

The difficulty is to understand without generalization, to see each piece of received truth, or generalization, *as true only if it is true for me*, solipsism again, I come back to it again, and for no other reason. In general, generalization is to lie, to tell lies.<sup>86</sup>

#### 1.4 The End of History and Disintegration of Self

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.<sup>87</sup>

If indeed the past is a foreign country, then the narrative of history might be thought of as a useful interpretational guide, translating salient aspects, and thus constructing a coherent and manageable understanding of the past for general consumption. In offering an ‘official’ account of the past, historical discourses allow individuals, and indeed whole societies, to locate themselves within the global totality through accurately constructing their identities in accordance with their documented heritage. The centrality of history throughout the modern period, therefore, can be explained by its power to authenticate any social or ideological position. History functions as a

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<sup>83</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, ‘I had a lovely flat then’, p.2

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, ‘At least once he visited us at the Angel’, p.1

<sup>85</sup> This is a notion that continues to be examined within contemporary fiction, and is discussed in Chapter 4 of this study through a reading of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*.

<sup>86</sup> B.S. Johnson, ‘Last’, *The Unfortunates*, p.6 [my italics]

<sup>87</sup> L.P. Hartley, ‘Prologue’ to *The Go-Between* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p.5

legitimising narrative, reassuring both individuals and communities of their significance within wider society; as recognised by Beverley Southgate, history serves the ‘vitaly important function of protecting us from the need to confront the stark reality of existential meaninglessness.’<sup>88</sup> This (ideological) understanding of history, as a tool that operates to mask the realities of existence, is examined throughout postmodern fiction. The recognition of its duplicitous nature – as a discourse, it functions not to record ‘reality’, but rather to obscure and distort its complexities – effectively serves to delegitimise its authority as a totalising narrative. Such a shift is redolent of Lyotard’s diagnosis of the postmodern moment.

Published in 1979, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* emerges as a key intervention within the postmodern debate, and provides one of the resounding definitions of the postmodern moment, in Lyotard’s proclamation that ‘simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.’<sup>89</sup> For Lyotard, metanarratives constitute the overarching, totalising narratives that are adopted in order to regulate society, and indeed interpellate individuals into compliant State subjects. The metanarratives which have effectively shaped Western consciousness – such as religion, science, Marxism and the idealist goals of emancipation encapsulated in the Enlightenment project – are fostered, it is argued, in order to conceal difference and opposition within society; in their functioning, ‘reality’ is concealed, normativity is established within subjects and homogenisation resounds in society. Within the postmodern moment (understood as that which ‘designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts’<sup>90</sup>), Lyotard argues that ‘the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.’<sup>91</sup> Indeed, proposing a working hypothesis for the report, Lyotard suggests:

The status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age.

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<sup>88</sup> Beverley Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.57

<sup>89</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* tr. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (1999), p.xxiv

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, p.xxiii

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p.37

This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s, which in Europe marks the completion of reconstruction.<sup>92</sup>

Furthermore, he goes on to argue that ‘the decline of the narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means; it can also be seen as an effect of the redeployment of advanced liberal capitalism.’<sup>93</sup> Within post-war, post-industrial society, then, the capitalist value of knowledge, as a revered commodity, increases, to the extent that ‘knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production [...] knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its “use-value”.’<sup>94</sup> Knowledge, then, is not that which facilitates and communicates ‘Truth’, rather it is recognised as a tool crucial to the success of the capitalist machine.<sup>95</sup> It necessarily follows, moreover, that as ‘the principle form of production’, knowledge is inextricably bound up in the politics of power: ‘knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major – perhaps *the* major – stake in the worldwide competition for power.’<sup>96</sup>

As the emphasis on knowledge shifts from its ‘use-value’ to its capitalist potential, Lyotard suggests that within the postmodern age the micro-narrative becomes the dominant means of disseminating knowledge: ‘the little narrative [*petit recit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science.’<sup>97</sup> In contrast to the metanarrative that exudes a universal truth, the proliferation of micro-narratives suggest instead the existence of fragmented, or local, truths, which are relevant only within a specific point in time; knowledge, then, is necessarily incomplete, and truth subjective and partial.

The revision of traditional realist conventions as evidenced within both *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and *The Unfortunates* might usefully be aligned with

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p.3

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, pp.37-38

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, pp.4-5

<sup>95</sup> In apparent contradistinction to Lyotard’s diagnosis of the postmodern age, capitalism is here established as the resounding metanarrative of contemporary Western society. Terry Eagleton argues that ‘the power of capital is now so drearily familiar, so sublimely omnipotent, that even large sectors of the left have succeeded in naturalizing it, taking it for granted as such an unbudgable structure that it is as though they hardly have the heart to speak of it’ (*The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p.23).

<sup>96</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, p.5

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p.60

Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern condition. In representing the past as a fluid, problematic category, both *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *The Unfortunates* challenge conventional understandings of history and ostensibly confirm its delegitimation as a totalising metanarrative; Zadie Smith and Monica Ali's rendering of the 'past' in *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* respectively, functions in much the same manner. Indeed, the reappraisal of history as evidenced in the novels perhaps goes some way to corroborate their status as 'postmodern'. As Woods suggests:

Postmodern fiction reveals the past as always ideologically and discursively constructed. It is a fiction which is directed both inward and outward, concerned both with its status as fiction, narrative or language, and also grounded in some verifiable historical reality.<sup>98</sup>

It is this tension between history and fiction – or rather, the acknowledgement of the fictionality of history – that defines what Linda Hutcheon refers to as 'historiographic metafiction.' A useful way to grasp Hutcheon's formulation is to reconceptualise Lodge's image of the novelist at the crossroads. Drawn towards the road leading to the historical novel, the writer of historiographic metafiction nonetheless fails to take the route as he stalls at the junction. She suggests:

In many historical novels, the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand. The metafictional self-reflexivity of postmodern novels prevents any such subterfuge, and poses that ontological join as a problem: how are we to know the past? What do (what can) we know of it now?<sup>99</sup>

The work of historiographic metafiction exposes the tensions between historicity and fictionality, but crucially privileges neither form. Stalled at the junction between the two routes, the author exploits the characteristics of both. As McHale argues,

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<sup>98</sup> Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism*, p.56

<sup>99</sup> Linda Hutcheon, 'Historiographic Metafiction' in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), p.839

‘postmodernists fictionalize history, but by doing so they imply that history itself may be a form of fiction.’<sup>100</sup>

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) offers a salient encapsulation of such issues. Narrated by Saleem Sinai, the novel recounts the history of the Sinai family as a means to offer an allegorical rendering of the events leading, and subsequent to, India’s independence. From the outset of the novel, the two disproportionately disparate narratives are shown to be inextricably linked. Born at the precise moment of India’s independence, Saleem is ‘mysteriously handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country.’<sup>101</sup> Moreover, as the text progresses, the micro-narratives that constitute the personal history of the Sinai family become increasingly entangled and inseparable from the overarching grand narrative of India’s history. Saleem notes: ‘at the end of 1947, life in Bombay was as teeming, as manifold, as multitudinously shapeless as ever ... except that I had arrived; I was already beginning to take my place at the centre of the universe; and by the time I had finished, I would give meaning to it all’ (pp.126-127). Discovering that his being born at the precise moment of India’s independence imbues him with power to influence the fate of the nation – ‘midnight and baby-snaps, prophets and prime ministers had created around me a glowing and inescapable mist of expectancy’ (p.152) – Saleem endeavours to assemble his eponymous contemporaries. His attempts to bring together the midnight’s children reflect the struggle to unite the seemingly disparate fragments of post-partition India. As Bradbury suggests, ‘the children of India’s famous midnight are themselves stories, the multiplication of all these new tales representing India’s best hope: after all, India is a “mass fantasy”, a “collective fiction.”’<sup>102</sup>

Similarly to both *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and *The Unfortunates*, Rushdie’s novel is presented through the framework of a distinctly unreliable narrator; history, is never presented as unified or coherent, rather it is slippery, fragmented, and necessarily limited to subjective interpretation. As he recounts the details of his family’s past, and by implication the history of India, Saleem recognises that his account will always be vulnerable to varying degrees of falsity:

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<sup>100</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p.96

<sup>101</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (London: Vintage, 1995), p.9

<sup>102</sup> *The Modern British Novel: 1878-2001*, p.466



Because I am rushing ahead at breakneck speed; errors are possible, and overstatements, and jarring alterations in tone; I'm racing the cracks, but I remain conscious that errors have already been made, and that, as my decay accelerates (my writing speed is having trouble keeping up), the risk of unreliability grows (p.270).

Immediately following his admission, Saleem further emphasises the tensions inherent to the fiction/history dichotomy, asserting that 'in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe' (pp.270-271). Certainly, despite frequent protestations affirming his 'place at the centre of the universe' (p.126), and his being 'linked to history both literally and metaphorically' (p.238), Saleem's narrative fails to resolve the conflict between history and fiction, truth and falsity. As such, the novel actively delegitimises the metanarrative of history, exposing it as discursive and, ultimately, discontinuous.

The examination of the complexities intrinsic to the fact/fiction dichotomy is further problematised in *Midnight's Children* through the frequent occurrence of 'real' historically verifiable moments within the narrative. The metafictional insertion and exploitation of such events within the text function to subvert the pretensions of the traditional historical novel; 'real' events are not added to the narrative as a means to authenticate the fictional account. Indeed, their inclusion within Rushdie's novel serves to provoke ontological investigations into the nature of historical discourse itself; 'what is history?', 'whose history?'.<sup>103</sup> While such ontological concerns are fundamental to the narrative, as the libel suit brought against Rushdie by Indira Gandhi attests, *Midnight's Children* is not immune to the problems inherent to such integration. Within the text there are obvious references to Mrs Gandhi that are historically verifiable: 'Mrs Indira Gandhi was born in November 1917 to Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru. Her middle name was Priyadarshini' (p.421), and so on. In isolation, the insertion of such references into a fictional narrative pose no real problem. When 'reality' seamlessly merges with fiction, as is the case with the following extract taken from the first edition of the novel, however, the assumed distinction between truth and artifice becomes increasingly fraught:

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<sup>103</sup> As explored in the following chapters, the fictionalisation of the events of 9/11 provokes similar ontological concerns regarding the nature of representation.

It has often been said that Mrs. Gandhi's younger son Sanjay accused his mother of being responsible, through her neglect, for his father's death and that this gave him an unbreakable hold over her so that she became incapable of denying him anything.<sup>104</sup>

Ascribing fictional histories (although we might question whether there can be any other kind) to 'real' individuals is ostensibly a step too far, and thus the outcome of the libel case fell resoundingly in Mrs Gandhi's favour. Rushdie was forced to publicly apologise and the offending passage was removed from all future editions of the novel. As Alison Lee suggests, the emergence of the case and its eventual outcome are important instances that further contribute to the debate surrounding the state of the postmodern novel, and more generally the presumed mimetic function of literature and its privileged role within society; such debates would be further invigorated with the publication of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and later by the (muted) protests that accompanied the publication of Ali's *Brick Lane*. Lee argues:

The court's ruling certainly echoes the humanist assumption (which the novel itself contradicts) that identity is constituted extra-linguistically. It assumes, therefore, that the 'Indira Gandhi' who appears in the novel *is* Indira Gandhi, and that the novel is thus a transcription of an historical reality unmediated by language. In this sense, it is a Realist judgement because it assumes a direct mimetic relationship between art and life.<sup>105</sup>

The blurring of distinction between fiction and reality seen in the text, as well as the fragmented form of the account itself, can be said to reinforce the 'mimetic relationship between art and life'. As Gasiorek argues, 'to tell this story in flat, realist prose would be to deny the diversity, dynamism, and political confusion of that country at that time.' Rather, 'Rushdie's verbal pyrotechnics [...] attempt to do justice to the period's often unreal atmosphere'<sup>106</sup>. The text's use of the technique of magic realism further reflects the period's 'unreal atmosphere.' By presenting surreal events within a broadly realist narrative, instances such as Saleem's recollection of

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<sup>104</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Knopf, 1981), p.406

<sup>105</sup> Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.53

<sup>106</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, p.167

‘children with two heads (sometimes one human, one animal)’ (p.270), the literal freezing of Saleem’s father’s ‘assets’ (p.136), Purushottam the sadhu’s bout of ‘suicidal hiccups’ (p.212), and the transformations of blood and tears to rubies and diamonds respectively (p.10), all contribute to the apparent delegitimation of ‘reality’.

Furthermore, as the narrator and, if his centrality to the universe is to be acknowledged, creator of the account, Saleem is fundamentally unable to control the path of history. As his narrative progresses and becomes increasingly unreliable and fragmented, so he too suffers physical disintegration:

Now, as the pouring-out of what-was-inside-me nears an end; as cracks widen within – I can hear and feel the rip tear crunch – I begin to grow thinner, translucent almost; there isn’t much of me left, and soon there will be nothing at all. Six hundred million specks of dust, and all transparent invisible as glass... (p.383)

The corporeal splintering of Saleem, evidenced in the increasing discovery of thin cracks over his body, is paralleled by the progressively segregated society of post-partition India; indeed, such is the contextualised determinism of identity, that Saleem himself *becomes* India, with his face mirroring a map of the country (p.231). As a midnight’s child, Saleem’s fate is necessarily entwined with that of the nation, and thus his physical and emotional disintegration is inevitable. The gradual deconstruction of a coherent sense of self is not, however, limited to Saleem’s predestined subjectivity: Aadam Aziz experiences similar disintegration, suffering a ‘crack-death’ (p.275), after which ‘Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru fell ill and never recovered his health’ (p.278); Reverend Mother’s grasp of language becomes increasingly disjointed as her speech is punctuated evermore frequently with ‘Whatsitsname’; and the names of characters become increasingly interchangeable. The progressive deconstruction of identity shown within the novel suggests that subjectivity is inextricably linked to the socio-political fabric, and thus, as society fragments and shifts, so too do conceptions and expressions of self.

Britain within the 1980s might be thought to have experienced such a resounding social shift. With the election of Thatcher’s government in 1979 and the perpetual intensification of international capitalism, the residual discourses of economics take on a heightened potency. As Daniel Lea remarks:

Upon election in 1979 the Thatcher administration put in train a series of economic policies which broke fundamentally with the broadly Keynesian model of previous governments and advocated a free market economy with limited state intervention. Over-reliance on the welfare system was discouraged in this model in favour of self-help, self-reliance and financial self-empowerment. [...] Thatcher broke from the Conservative tradition of the 'One Nation' ideal, replacing it with a political relativism that openly acknowledged divisions in the fabric of the nation.<sup>107</sup>

Characterised by the shift in governmental focus from a reliance upon a collectivised welfare structure to a system that promoted acquisitive solipsism, as the dehumanising power of capital became increasingly pervasive during the 1980s, so the individual became ever more dislocated from the fragmented social fabric.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, such was the disjointed nature of British society, that by 1987 Thatcher was able to pronounce its effective death, and so define the achievements of her premiership. In an interview with *Woman's Own* magazine, she notoriously declared that 'there's no such thing as society', and in acknowledging the ease in which the welfare system could be exploited, further commented that 'it is our duty to look after ourselves'<sup>109</sup>. Furthermore, with an increasing emphasis placed upon individual financial dependence and self-empowerment, subjectivity itself becomes ruthlessly determined by economics. As John Self proclaims in Martin Amis's *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984), 'you know where you are with economic certainty.'<sup>110</sup>

Similarly to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, *Money* can be thought of as a text that chronicles the disintegration of identity, or rather, of Self. A diatribe on the vacuity of the capitalist-driven landscape of the 1980s, the novel follows the solipsistic, international capitalist, John Self, a successful director of television commercials, as he embarks upon his latest filmmaking venture. Like Rushdie's rendering of character, Self's physical and emotional construction is shown to be reflective of the shifting social landscapes in which he is located; a trope that is

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<sup>107</sup> Daniel Lea, 'One Nation, Oneself: Politics, Place and Identity in Martin Amis' Fiction' in *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. James Acheson and Sarah C.E. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p.71

<sup>108</sup> See Jonathan Coe's novel *What A Carve Up!* (1994) for a satirical exploration of the impact of the social shift generated by Thatcherism.

<sup>109</sup> Margaret Thatcher, 'Aids, Education and the Year 2000!' in *Woman's Own* (October 31, 1987) <<http://www.margarethatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=106689>> (accessed 01.02.07)

<sup>110</sup> Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (London: Vintage, 2005), p.24

continued within contemporary examinations of urban subjectivity.<sup>111</sup> As he travels back and forth between London and New York, he becomes increasingly defined by the contours of the urban environment. Just as Saleem becomes India, so too Self becomes the city:

My head is a city, and various pains have now taken up residence in various parts of my face. A gum-and-bone ache has launched a cooperative on my upper west side. Across the park, neuralgia has rented a duplex in my fashionable east seventies. Downtown, my chin throbs with lofts of jaw-loss. As for my brain, my hundreds, it's Harlem up there, expanding in the summer fires. It boils and swells. One day soon it is going to burst (p.26).

As the city becomes increasingly anthropomorphised – ‘unlovely London’ is likened to ‘an old man with bad breath’, where ‘the sob of weariness catching in his lungs’ is audible (p.85) – so the urban subject is steadily dehumanised.<sup>112</sup> Self recognises that the ‘inner cities crackle with the money chaos’ (p.66), and thus with its heightened emphasis on capitalist gain, the novel’s representation of the city suggests that there is little space in the urban landscape for the development of human society. Engaging with others largely for the purposes of business and sexual gratification (which as a marketable commodity, is invariably purchased), Self’s interaction with other human beings is principally facilitated through, and restricted by, capital.

Just as society becomes increasingly fragmented within the period of late-capitalism, so as Self immerses himself ever more deeply into the hedonistic lifestyle of capitalist excess, the marks of his physical disintegration become more prominent. While his bodily degeneration is apparent from the outset of the novel, other than the frustrating inconvenience of a continual throbbing emanating from a rotten tooth, he remains relatively indifferent to his corporeal breakdown. Momentarily bewildered by the engorged image which greets him as he stares into an equally unimpressed mirror, Self wonders whether his failing body, likened to ‘the winded boiler of a

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<sup>111</sup> See Chapter 3 of this study.

<sup>112</sup> As will be examined more extensively in chapter 3 of this study, the postmodern city space is frequently characterised by the extent to which it excludes and disorients the individual. Faced with the dilemma of how to traverse the Los Angeles cityscape, Self concludes: ‘The only way to get across the road is to be born there. All the ped-xing signs say DON’T WALK, all of them, all the time. That is the message, the content of Los Angeles: don’t walk. Stay inside’ (p.168). Moreover, Self’s ceaseless movement between London and New York ensures that he simultaneously feels at home in both cities, yet essentially belongs to neither.

thrashed old tramp,' can be fixed by money (p5). In a late capitalist society, the human body itself is a commodity, and is ultimately replaceable: 'If you lose a rug, you can get a false one. If you lose your laugh, you can get a false one. If you lose your mind, you can get a false one' (p.27). Self's anxieties about his body image are, therefore, only ever transient, for, if the capital is there, one is always able to have the 'whole body drilled down and repaired, replaced' (pp.5-6). Much more difficult to fix, however, is the inevitable fragmentation of the consciousness; or rather, the disintegration of Self.

The apparent commodification of the individual is clearly evident in *Money*, where Self effectively buys into differing lifestyles. Within the late-capitalist era, the subject becomes so immersed within consumer culture that it itself becomes a marketable commodity.<sup>113</sup> Certainly, the techniques of modern advertising would seem to further validate such an assertion, where it is essentially not the product itself that is being marketed, but rather the feeling that owning the possession brings to its recipient, and moreover, the type of person that it would transform them into. Within such narratives, certain 'types' of individuals are positioned not only as normative, but as coveted, and thus it is their projected lifestyles that consumers buy into. As Erika Doss argues, within postmodern culture Descartes' axiom has undergone significant revision, and thus the mantra of late-capitalist society is seemingly 'I consume, therefore I am.'<sup>114</sup> Just as the postmodern moment is characterised by the decentring and rupturing of society, so within the period of late-capitalism, the coherent modern individual is displaced by the plethora of fragmented postmodern subjectivities.

Exploring the nature of the transition in identity politics symptomatic of the shift from modern to postmodern sensibilities, Jameson juxtaposes the unified modern monad with its schizophrenic postmodern manifestation. For Jameson, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) perfectly encapsulates the characteristic tensions of modern identity. The figure, silenced within the artistic medium, characterises the solitude and anxiety experienced by the modern individual. He argues that 'its gestural content already underscores its own failure, since the realm of the sonorous, the cry, the raw vibrations of the human throat, are incompatible with its medium.' Emanating from the individual, the 'sonorous vibrations' become 'the very geography

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<sup>113</sup> Andy Warhol's *Twenty-Five Colored Marilyns* (1962) perhaps captures this notion most saliently.

<sup>114</sup> Erika Doss, *Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.154

of a universe in which pain itself now speaks and vibrates through the material sunset and landscape.’<sup>115</sup> The concentric loops that envelop the figure, however, gesture towards the expression of its resounding anxiety. The painting implies the perpetual imprisonment of the subject, for while he is seemingly free from the constraints of a repressive society, an inevitable consequence of his individuality is the manifestation of the inescapable feelings of solitude, alienation and anxiety. The modern individual is effectively incarcerated by his own freedom, for ‘when you constitute your individual subjectivity as a self-sufficient field and a closed realm, you thereby shut yourself off from everything else and condemn yourself to the mindless solitude of the monad, buried alive and condemned to a prison cell without egress.’ Within the period of postmodernism, the displaced individual is effectively able to break free from such debilitating confines. The ‘once-existing centred subject, in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family, has today in the world of organizational bureaucracy dissolved’, and thus with the apparent effacement of the modern monad, comes the accompanying emancipation from anxiety and solitude, and indeed the ‘liberation from every other kind of feeling as well.’<sup>116</sup>

Amis’s depiction of Self as a dispassionate capitalist, would appear to reflect the characteristics of postmodern subjectivity as outlined above. Indeed, Self’s increasing corporeal disintegration seemingly reflects Jameson’s summary of the transition in the dynamics of modernist to postmodernist identity politics, ‘as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter’s fragmentation.’<sup>117</sup> As the narrative progresses, however, the disintegration of Self is further characterised by the increasingly schizophrenic nature of his consciousness. As it becomes increasingly apparent that the fragmentation of the psyche remains impervious to the healing power of capital, Self’s multiple selves are manifested through his multivocality:

There are, at the latest count, four distinct voices in my head. First, of course, is the jabber of money, which might be represented as the blur on the top rung of a typewriter [...] Second is the voice of pornography [...] Third, the voice of aging and weather, of time travel through days and days, the ever-weakening voice of stung shame, sad boredom and futile protest (pp.107-108).

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<sup>115</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.14

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p.15

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, p.14

It is perhaps the fourth voice which is most intriguing, and indeed the one that Self most actively seeks to suppress: ‘number four is the real intruder. [...] It has to do with quitting work and needing to think about things I never used to think about.’ Disabled until now by the excessive lure of capital and commodification, the fourth voice is that of Self’s residual humanist conscience. In a decade where self-empowerment, and indeed self-validation, is determined by capitalist success, it is crucial that such debilitating (humanist) voices remain repressed. Self suggests that the individual has to actively admit such thoughts into the psyche, but once in, like the vampire, they have free reign to destroy what lies within (p.108).

Fortunately for Self, his surrounding environment provides ample opportunity to suppress the encroachment of such potentially debilitating thoughts, and through his ‘wasteful immersion in the unproductive and excessive expenditures of consumer culture,’<sup>118</sup> he achieves, albeit momentarily, the desired distraction. In such an environment, money is literally what makes the man; in engorging himself with all that consumerism makes available – alcohol, fast-food, sex – Self establishes, and has validated, his identity. Self *is* money and is defined, ultimately, through his possessions:

Everyone must have, everyone demands their vivid personalities, their personal soap opera, street theatre, everyone *must have* some art in their lives...Our lives, they harbour form, artistic shape, and we want our form revealed even though we only move in detail, with keys, spongebag, coffee-cups, shirt drawer, chequebooks, linen, hairstyle, curtain-rod holders, fridge guarantees, biros, buttons, money (p.361).

It is the anxiety of losing money, and not his deteriorating health, that is the dominant concern for Self. Without possessions, or the means to obtain them, he is a powerless non-self; he surmises that ‘without money, you’re one day old and one inch tall. And you’re nude too’ (p.383). As the narrative progresses and Self’s imagined anxieties are transformed into a palpable reality, his identity progressively diminishes, and as he loses money, so too his life loses form (p.384). Following the transition of his

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<sup>118</sup> Fred Botting, ‘From Excess to the New World Order’ in *British Fiction of the 1990s* ed. Nick Bentley (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), p.23



capitalist identity to a ‘busted’ nonentity, Self, seemingly admitting the vampiric fourth voice into his consciousness, has an epiphanic realisation, concluding that ‘I want money again but I feel better now that I haven’t got any’ (p.391). Regardless of the multiple subjectivities that had continually defined and redefined his identity, a residual semblance of humanity remains within his psyche. Indeed, throughout the novel there are momentary interjections, usually communicated through Self’s ‘fourth voice’, attesting to the need to reject the all-pervasive trappings of capital. Self is ostensibly aware that as he submerses himself ever more within the superficial excesses of consumer culture, he increasingly becomes defined by it: ‘I am made of – junk, I’m just junk’ (p.265). Moreover, he recognises that his heightened engagement with the cultural of schlock is reflected not only in his physical appearance, but further is manifested in the disintegration of his mind:

I disclaim responsibility for many of my thoughts. They don’t come from me. They come from these squatters and hoboes who hang out in my head, these guys who stroll past me like naturalized, emancipated rodents (passport and papers all in order), like gentrified rats, flapping a paw and saying ‘Hi, pal’, and I have to wait and not mind while they make coffee or hog the can – there’s nothing I can do about them (p.267).

This admission not only reaffirms Self’s unreliability as a narrator, but also points towards his exposure to a profoundly diseased social fabric. Referring to the ‘chick who’s dying in her teens because, according to the *Line*, she’s allergic to the twentieth century,’ Self emphasises the pernicious influences of postmodern existence. While he distances himself from her, remarking that he is addicted rather than allergic to the twentieth century (p.91), the physical and mental decay that increasingly defines his existence suggests that, having been infected by the excesses of postmodern culture, he shares a similar fate to the dying teen.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> The notion of a degenerative society invading, virus-like, the subjectivities of its inhabitants is examined extensively within Jeffrey Eugenides’ novel *The Virgin Suicides* (1993). A retrospective narrative, the novel chronicles the lives of the families living in an archetypal American suburb in the 1970s. The novel tells the story of the mysterious Lisbon sisters from the viewpoint of the boys (now men) who were once enchanted by them. As each sister consecutively commits suicide, the narrative follows the boys as they struggle to comprehend the impact of their sudden deaths upon the community. While the novel offers numerous explanations to account for the sisters’ suicides, the general consensus reached is that their demise ran parallel to, and was therefore influenced by, the degeneration of society: ‘something sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls. [...] The

In *Money*, financial success clearly results in empowerment, but crucially, not of the self. The capitalist, defined by his financial acumen, is nonetheless bereft of humanity, and thus the individual is displaced by a ruthless, dehumanised automaton. The frequency in which Self's fourth voice permeates both the narrative and his consciousness, however, suggests the enduring existence of a residual humanism. Although the processes of late-capitalism are attributed to the destruction of society, throughout the novel Self expresses his yearning to connect with others, and re-establish a human bond. 'Earthling reassurance [is] in permanently short supply' (p.97), and as such, Self continually demands, but infrequently receives 'that human touch' (p.67). It is precisely the essential 'human touch' that is lacking from the postmodern environment where 'society no longer exists.' Certainly, the desire to form meaningful connections with other human beings seems irreconcilable with the ideologies of 'self-help, self-reliance and financial self-empowerment' that define the postmodern moment. Just as Van Helsing *et al* are unable to prevent Dracula from entering Lucy Westenra's room, so Self is incapable of repressing his fourth voice; and thus its frequent intrusion within both the narrative and his consciousness perhaps serves to emphasise the beginnings of postmodernism's 'terminal illness'.

### 1.5 The 'New' Postmodern Tradition

In the opening chapter to his study *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, Richard Bradford outlines the primary aim of the study as the attempt to explore the revised thesis proposed by David Lodge in 1992, outlining the form of the contemporary novel. Lodge, as we have seen, provided a useful image illustrating the status of the English author writing in the 1970s. Revising this thesis in his 1992 essay 'The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads?', he evokes a more complex depiction of the contemporary author. No longer standing indecisively at the crossroads, by the early 1990s the figure now more resembled a customer engulfed within an 'aesthetic supermarket' that harbours a vast multitude of different styles and techniques to be purchased and returned at will. As Bradford notes, the revised conception of the author seemed to negate the realism/modernism conflict that had

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Lisbon girls became a symbol of what was wrong with the country, the pain it inflicted on even its most innocent citizens' (Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p231.

formed the foundations of Lodge's previous thesis. Within the 'aesthetic supermarket', the author is not faced with such a rigid decision, since 'hybridity now occupie[s] the centre ground.'<sup>120</sup>

Bradford argues that such a conception of the author figure, borrowing at will random techniques and scenarios, epitomises the emergent, radical fiction produced during the eclectic postmodern period of the mid-1970s and 1980s. Amis is viewed as representative of the type of figure to be found browsing the wares of this cultural supermarket. Indeed, exploiting 'the opportunity offered by fiction to set in train separate apparently incompatible trajectories of documentary-style mimesis versus grotesque caricature, brilliantly choreographed slapstick versus metafictional experiment, to name but four,'<sup>121</sup> he might be seen as the postmodern shopper par excellence. Acknowledging that their novels, superficially at least, have little in common, Bradford places Ian McEwan alongside Amis as a crucial figure to the development of this specific stage of British postmodern fiction. Similarly to Amis's texts, there is evident within his fiction a process of layering, both stylistically and thematically, which perhaps against all odds, somehow fuses to form a stratified, yet unified whole.

Bradford is keen to emphasise, however, that although towards the end of the 1970s both Amis and McEwan were recognised as displaying considerable literary talent, they remained relatively marginal figures, unable to fully penetrate the mainstream market. The result being that neither figure 'was regarded by those who take it upon themselves to assess the mood of fiction writing per se as having significantly altered a mood and landscape that had predominated since about 1950.'<sup>122</sup> Indeed, it would be a good few more years before the aesthetic supermarket would enjoy the booming sales figures seemingly proposed by Lodge; and one might contend that its apparent growth in popularity, as is typical within our late capitalist society, was the result of a cunning marketing ploy. For as Bradford suggests, the heirs to the likes of Amis and McEwan, a group dubbed the 'New Postmodernists', ostensibly shop at the same store, yet unlike the earlier works of their predecessors, their fiction exploits the radical pomposity of postmodernism, and in so doing, transforms it into a lucrative commodity.

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<sup>120</sup> Bradford, Richard. *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p.3

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25

To this new subgenre of fiction, Bradford allocates such diverse figures as David Mitchell, Toby Litt, Matt Thorne, Ali Smith and John Lanchester, all linked, in his mind, by their ability to make the ‘groundbreaking legacies of Joyce and Woolf [...] consumer friendly.’<sup>123</sup> It is interesting to note the useful model of continual progression which seems to form the foundation of Bradford’s conception of modern literary history. Rather than a series of dynastic successions manifested, broadly speaking, in the associated, yet fundamentally separate, movements of realism, modernism and postmodernism, Bradford seems to suggest the fluid, and relatively uncomplicated, progression of one style into another; thus a clear, ancestral link is made apparent between the likes of Woolf, Joyce, Fowles, Amis, McEwan, Mitchell, Litt and their contemporaries. The new postmodernists, he argues, produce works of fiction that effectively dilute the more extreme aspects of modernism and postmodernism in order to procure a pseudo-realist form that remains intellectually informed and stimulating, yet which is distinct from its literary predecessors by the extent to which it is commercially viable.

The practitioners of new postmodernism are key to Bradford’s central thesis on the state of the contemporary British novel, since their emergence, and indeed apparent cultural dominance, might be thought of as the third (and resulting) aspect of the realism/(post)modernism dialectic. Bradford notes that the proliferation of material emanating from the new postmodernists at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, marks the end of the tension between realism and modernism/postmodernism. ‘Neither side’ he argues ‘is victorious, but the middle ground of fiction is shared by hybridized versions of both.’<sup>124</sup> Indeed, within his epilogue Bradford, discussing the apparent end of tensions between conservatism and radicalism, realism and (post)modernism, compares the current state of contemporary fiction to that of the Swiss Re Tower, London. He argues that while those authors writing within the tradition of new postmodernism remain the heirs to the likes of Joyce, Woolf, B.S. Johnson, *et al*, ‘their techniques have become as domesticated as that cosy monument to modernism, affectionately termed “the Gherkin”, that is now as agreeably familiar a part of the London skyline as the dome of St. Paul’s.’<sup>125</sup> That is to say, contemporary fiction retains, and indeed revels in, its

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p.78

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p.79

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p.243

eclectic mix of techniques and styles, yet this schizophrenic form has, by its being squeezed into a pseudo-realist mould, become normalized and accepted into the broader cultural, and commercial, landscape.

Patricia Duncker's *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996) offers a useful illustration of the approach fostered by the new postmodernists. The novel, written broadly within a realist framework, resonates with the theories of Michel Foucault, and indeed is centred around the philosophical premise outlined in his introduction to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*: 'there are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks and perceive differently that one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.'<sup>126</sup> The text follows, and is narrated by, an unnamed postgraduate student who is writing a thesis on the French author Paul Michel. A fictional construct, Duncker's rendering of the author and his close kinship to Foucault exploits the tensions between fiction and reality, as typically examined within postmodern metafiction. The novel includes a journalistic account – detailing Michel's homosexuality, mental breakdown and institutional incarceration (key concerns of Foucault's work) – which serves to establish the significance of the relationship between the fictionalised author and Foucault and emphasise the parallels in both their work and lives: 'the two writers explored similar themes: death, sexuality, crime, madness, an irony now all too evident as we contemplate the recent tragic death of Michel Foucault and the terrible fate of Paul Michel.' The tension between reality and fiction is further complicated by the revision of history that is intrinsic to the article's account of Foucault's funeral. As one would expect within a work of metafiction, details of the account that are verifiably 'true' (the public ceremony at the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière, the burial at Poitiers), exist alongside rewritings of history (Paul Michel, rather than Gilles Deleuze<sup>127</sup> reads the above extract to the mourners);<sup>128</sup> moreover, the conflation of fiction and reality functions here not to authenticate the narrative, but rather to draw attention to the blurring of distinction between the two categories.

The novel further explores the complexities of the relationship between the author and his reader, questioning the (poststructuralist) assumption that 'you can't

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<sup>126</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure* tr. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p.8

<sup>127</sup> Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) might also provide the novel with an interesting subtext.

<sup>128</sup> Patricia Duncker, *Hallucinating Foucault* (London: Picador, 1997), p.31

interpret writing in terms of a life', since 'writing has its own rules' (p.23). Despite the narrator's persistent protestations that, for the purposes of his research, it is the fiction of Michel rather than the man himself that is his central concern, he is convinced by his girlfriend, 'the Germanist', to travel to Clermont-Ferrand to liberate the author from the Hôpital Sainte-Marie. Although the author 'went quite mad in 1968' (p.45), his mental breakdown is attributed to the death of his reader, Foucault; following an incident in a graveyard on the 30<sup>th</sup> June 1984 (the day after Foucault's funeral), Michel was arrested and institutionalised at the hospital. The Germanist explains: 'Foucault was dead. For Paul Michel it was the end of writing. [...] Why bother to exist if your reader is dead?' (p.37). It is this musing that is explored throughout the remaining narrative. Indeed, the narrator's burgeoning relationship with Michel not only reflects the concerns of Foucauldian theory - in establishing a bond with the socially ostracised Michel, the narrator effectively explores the extent to which 'it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known'<sup>129</sup> - but further functions to examine and deconstruct Barthesian theories declaring the death of the author. The narrator's desire to establish a bond with Michel clearly subverts the claims made in Barthes' seminal essay. The author's death at the end of the novel and the narrator's accompanying proclamation that, as his reader, he will keep his work alive, while seeming to reflect the theory more accurately, actually function to interrogate and challenge the propositions outlined in Barthes' study. Barthes declares that in order to furnish the literary text with a future, the reader must be liberated through the author's death; for the place where the multiplicity of writing is focused 'is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.'<sup>130</sup> Despite his death at the end of the novel, however, the narrator pledges, through a letter composed on his behalf by the Germanist, to keep Michel alive: 'when I found you I never gave you up. Nor will I do so now. [...] I never feared losing you. Because I will never let you go.' Moreover, despite his absence, Michel's authority continues to impact upon his reader, as the narrator vows 'I will go on writing within the original shapes you made for me' (p.171); an inherently self-reflexive remark when one considers the novel's status as a work of new postmodernism.

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<sup>129</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, p.9

<sup>130</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music Text*, p.148

Characteristic of the fiction of the new postmodernists, Duncker incorporates and examines the theories and concerns of postmodernism in such a manner as to make them 'more accessible and domesticated.'<sup>131</sup> The theories of Foucault and Barthes resonate throughout the narrative, yet the novel lacks the philosophical fervour that might be thought to have defined the radical fictions of the earlier postmodern tradition. Indeed, the ease with which Duncker subtly engages with the theories is perhaps suggestive of the extent to which postmodernism, and its concerns, have, at this point in its genesis, permeated the popular consciousness.

The engagement with the theories and motifs of postmodernism as evidenced in Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998) similarly suggests the contemporary domesticisation of the form. Divided into three sections, the novel is largely written within a realist tradition, yet its playful self-reflexivity and engagement with both modern and postmodern tropes aligns it with the fiction of the new postmodern tradition. The novel offers an examination of the problematic conception of nationhood within the period of post-empire; yet as Barnes attests, it is an 'idea of England' novel, rather than a 'state of England' novel.<sup>132</sup> Certainly, conducting an epistemological interrogation of the notions of Englishness through a Baudrillardian framework, the novel does not so much offer a commentary of the state of the contemporary nation, as it interrogates and deconstructs the dominant and often contradictory narratives that constitute England's collective identity.

The opening section of the novel is a retrospective narrative that, in providing an 'historical' account of the central protagonist's life prior to the events that constitute the second, major thread of the text, introduces many of the concerns explored throughout. Communicated through an omniscient narrator, Martha Cochrane recalls her first memory: sitting contentedly on the kitchen floor with her mother, completing her 'Counties of England' jigsaw puzzle. Regardless of her attempts to force random pieces into the wrong holes, the fragmented image would gradually take form before them. The miniaturised rendering of England, however, would inevitably be incomplete, as reaching the end of the puzzle, she would always find one piece missing. Frustrated momentarily by the encroaching 'sense of desolation, failure and disappointment at the imperfection of the world,' Martha's

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<sup>131</sup> Bradford, Richard. *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, p.78

<sup>132</sup> Julian Barnes cited in 'He's Turned Towards Python (But Not the Dead Flaubert's Parrot Sketch)' (unsigned interview) in *Observer* (August 30, 1998)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/1998/aug/30/fiction.julianbarnes>> (accessed 30.11.09)

England, and subsequently her heart, would be ‘made whole again’ as her father, ‘who always seemed to be hanging around at this moment, would find the piece in the unlikeliest place.’<sup>133</sup> The image of the (incomplete) jigsaw resonates throughout the novel. As a simple allegory, the fragmented image of England depicted by the jigsaw might be thought to reflect the disintegration of society that is characteristic of the postmodern moment; moreover, as an incomplete image, the jigsaw is perhaps representative of the difficulties of forming a unified perception of England within the period of post-empire. As a ‘preamble’ to his novel *Life: A User’s Manual* (1978), Georges Perec muses over the fragmented form of the jigsaw, and suggests the following:

The perceived object [...] is not a sum of elements to be distinguished from one another and analysed discretely, but a pattern, that is to say a form, a structure: the element’s existence does not precede the existence of the whole, it comes neither before nor after it, for the parts do not determine the pattern, but the pattern determines the parts. [...] The pieces are readable, take on a sense, only when assembled; in isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing.<sup>134</sup>

We might argue that with the destruction of society that is characteristic of the postmodern age, the subject possesses a similar fate to the individual jigsaw piece. As Self comes to realise in *Money*, without human connection, the individual amounts to very little. Similarly within *England, England*, ‘individuals’ are shown to possess an identity only within the context of the wider totality. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that considered in isolation, individual subjects are insignificant and ultimately replaceable.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, the novel itself, while exploring and deconstructing perceptions of nationhood, might further be conceived as a narrative that chronicles Martha’s search for a coherent identity; an endeavour which she ultimately recognises as futile: ‘perhaps it was [...] the case that, for all a lifetime’s internal struggling, you were finally no more than what others saw you as’ (p.259).

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<sup>133</sup> Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London: Vintage, 2008), pp.5-6

<sup>134</sup> Georges Perec, *Life: A User’s Manual* tr. David Bellos (London: Vintage, 2003) [no page number]

<sup>135</sup> Sir Jack Pitman, creator of ‘England England’, has a seemingly inexhaustable supply of PAs whose names, despite him rebranding them all ‘Susie’, he can never remember (p.34); and similarly all ‘lactating mothers’ at Auntie May’s are, in accordance with the ‘house tradition’, stripped of their individuality and renamed ‘Heidi’ (p.156).



The image of the jigsaw puzzle is central to the narrative, yet as Martha admits immediately, the memory is a false one, and is better conceived as ‘her first artfully, innocently arranged lie’ (p.4). Seemingly reappropriating Derridean theory, Martha realises that there is no such thing as a true, transcendental memory; rather, ‘a memory was by definition not a thing, it was ... a memory. A memory now of a memory a bit earlier of a memory before that of a memory way back when’ (p.3). Constantly deferred back onto a previous, equally unreliable recollection, accounts of the past are understood to be inherently false, both mediated by the unreliability of memory and coloured by the present. For Martha, remembering one’s past was ‘like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself’ (p.6). Certainly, the problematic rendering of the past is explored more explicitly within the proceeding two sections of the novel, which interrogate the extent to which reality itself might be considered a fabricated construct. While Martha recognises that memories, by their very nature, will never amount to anything other than ‘innocently arranged lies’, her desire to uncover the truth of her past remains strong; for uncovering the past would allow her to locate her true sense of self, and thus solve ‘life’s central predicament’: how to know your own heart (p.226). The futility of Martha’s search to locate an authentic moment of being, to uncover a ‘true, unprocessed memory’ (p.5), resonates with the insatiable, but unsatiated, yearning for the ‘real’ that, for Baudrillard, characterises the postmodern condition.

Baudrillard argues in *Simulacra and Simulation* that the rise in digital and cybernetic technologies seen within the postmodern moment, has led to a society that is defined by information overload. Rather than disseminating knowledge within a more efficient way, the constant flow of information facilitated by the new technologies has meant that there has been an implosion of meaning within contemporary society; as he contends, ‘we live in a world in which there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.’<sup>136</sup> Indeed, in considering the function of the mass media in the dissemination, and subsequent implosion, of meaning, Baudrillard asserts that ‘rather than creating communication,’ information ‘exhausts itself in the act of staging communication. Rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning.’<sup>137</sup> He goes on: ‘The media carry meaning and

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<sup>136</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* tr. Sheila Faria Glaser (1994; Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.79

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, p.80

countermeaning, they manipulate in all directions at once, nothing can control this process, they are the vehicle for the simulation internal to the system and the simulation that destroys the system. [...] There is no alternative to this, no logical resolution.’<sup>138</sup> While the media carry and communicate meaning, the recognition that they do so through processes of manipulation, suggests that the information transmitted is irrevocably disconnected from an authentic reality. Notions of ‘the real’ are deconstructed as the distinction between ‘meaning’ and ‘countermeaning’ becomes ever more eroded. Within postmodern society, then, there is a profound ‘loss of the real’.<sup>139</sup>

Although absent, a yearning for the return of the real characterises postmodern society, and is a concern manifested and explored within its cultural products. Baudrillard suggests that ‘the entry of history into the cinema epitomises this nostalgia for a lost referential.’<sup>140</sup> As Martha recognises that memories are inevitably nothing more than falsified reconstructions of the past, so Baudrillard emphasises that the version of the history presented within such nostalgic films is just that: a *version* of history, rather than a reflection of the ‘true’ past. Moreover, he suggests that the deconstruction and problematic reconstruction of history that is intrinsic to such films, additionally defines wider society’s own relationship to the past: ‘in the “real” as in cinema, there was history but there isn’t anymore. Today the history that is “given back” to us (precisely because it was taken from us) has no more of a relation to a “historical real” than neo-figuration in painting does to the classical figuration of the real.’<sup>141</sup> Baudrillard argues that within postmodern society, the nostalgia for the real is manifested within the order of simulation:

Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us – a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence.

Crucial to Baudrillard’s account of postmodern society’s engagement with ‘reality’ is the distinction between representation and simulation. Whereas representation ‘stems

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p.84

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p.45

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p.44

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p.45

from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real’, simulation stems from the belief that behind the signs, there is nothing. Simulation, thus, ‘envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.’ Within the postmodern moment, then, the simulation functions to re-present reality as being more ‘real’ than reality itself: the hyperreal ‘has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.’<sup>142</sup> It is this, problematic model of re-presentation that defines Pitman’s imagining of England in his creation of ‘England, England’.

A self-made English gentleman<sup>143</sup>, Sir Jack Pitman buys the Isle of Wight and its residents in order to recreate a hyperrealistic version of England that, in reorganising the landscape into a more consumer-friendly environment – all of England’s major tourist attractions are resituated within close proximity to one another – offers ‘everything you imagined England to be, but [in a] more convenient, cleaner, friendlier, and more efficient’ fashion (p.184). Epitomising Baudrillard’s diagnosis of the postmodern period, Pitman declares to his fleet of advisors – Martha is employed as the project’s ‘resident cynic’ – that his vision amounts to much more than the creation of an English-based theme park; rather England, England offers ‘*the thing itself*’ (p.59). Indeed, the parallel between Pitman’s project and the theories of the hyperreal, as outlined by Baudrillard, are made explicit as a ‘French intellectual’ is brought in to address the members of the committee. Quoting Guy Debord<sup>144</sup>, while never explicitly mentioning him, the intellectual reflects upon the nature of reality through a philosophical framework that succinctly captures the essence of Debordian and Baudrillardian theories, whilst subverting the implications of their arguments. While both Debord and Baudrillard lament the loss of reality that defines postmodern society, for the intellectual, the simulation, and not the original, provides the greater *frisson*: ‘We must demand the replica, since the reality, the truth, the authenticity of the replica is the one we can possess, colonise, reorder, find *jouissance* in, and, finally, if and when we decide, it is the reality which, since it is our destiny, we may meet, confront and destroy’ (p.55). Certainly, as the narrative progresses, it

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, pp.6-7

<sup>143</sup> Pitman is the very embodiment of the fragmented, postmodern subject. His whole identity is affected, from the MCC braces (despite him never being a member of the MCC), adorning his, no doubt puffed-out chest, to his obscuring his (alleged) Eastern-European roots by adopting an English identity and name in order to deprive his heritage of its ‘Mitteleuropäisch tinge’ (p.33).

<sup>144</sup> The intellectual quotes from Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* when he announces that ‘all that was once directly lived, has become mere representation.’ A declaration he finds to be true, ‘even if conceived in profound error’ (pp.54-55).

is England, England, the nostalgic simulation of old England, which takes on the increased resonance. As the hyperrealistic rendering of the nation attracts more and more visitors, the 'original' is gradually displaced, to the extent that 'the world began to forget that 'England' had ever meant anything except England, England, a false memory which the Island worked to reinforce' (p.253).

In assessing the form that his reconstruction of England should best take, Pitman instructs his advisors to conduct a survey amongst the potential multi-national purchasers of 'Quality Leisure', asking them to list six characteristics that define England and Englishness. Amongst the inevitable mention of the iconographical images that, for the tourist at least, define the English landscape (Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, Double-Decker Buses, the White Cliffs of Dover), are a number of characteristics thought to be quintessentially, and idiosyncratically, English. Amongst them: snobbery, phlegm/stiff upper lip, hypocrisy, homosexuality, whingeing, emotional frigidity, and flagellation. As an incensed Pitman goes through the list, systematically crossing out those characteristics thought to be contrary to the ethos of the project (that is, to provide a 'consumer-friendly' rendering of England, which is more real than reality itself), the narrative highlights the extent to which notions of nationhood and collective history are subjectively constructed, like Martha's memories, as means to 'make the present able to live with itself.' For Pitman, the reality of England lies within his envisaged simulation of England, England, and not the collective perceptions detailed on the list: 'Who the *fuck* did they think they were, going around saying things like that about England? His England. What did *they* know?' (pp.83-86). Moreover, since history itself is not authentically verifiable ('nothing was set in concrete: that was the nature of History', p.127), the more unpalatable accounts of the past that define the nation can be manipulated and rendered more commercially viable; in England, England there is no history except Pitco history (p.202). Further emphasising the constructed nature of history and nationhood, it is the myths of England, rather than its 'histories', that are venerated within England, England. While 'real' historical events are revised,<sup>145</sup> the committee are loathe to alter the 'facts' of primal myth: when Martha questions why Robin Hood's Merrie Men are exclusively men, Jeff (Pitman's 'Concept Developer'),

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<sup>145</sup> Pitman, for instance, instructs that the Magna Carta be 'translated into decent English' (p.85), and redefines Nell Gwynn from an underage 'Protestant whore' to a 'nice middle-class girl who ends up marrying the King' (p.94).

lifting his eyes in exasperation, retorts ‘You can’t start *messing around* with Robin Hood. I mean...’ (p.148). It is, then, primarily myth, rather than history, that defines the collective perceptions of the nation, and thus ‘reality’ is effectively defined through fiction.<sup>146</sup>

Barnes’s novel is clearly overt in its engagement with the theories and stylistic motifs of postmodernism, yet like Duncker’s *Hallucinating Foucault*, it treats the material with a knowingness, and indeed a subtlety, that is suggestive of the fictions of the new postmodern tradition. Indeed, while the concerns of both plot and characterisation interrogate ‘traditional’ metafictional tropes such as the fictionality of history and the decentring of the subject, the intertextual nature of the novel emphasises the explicit self-reflexivity of the text. As Ian Sansom suggests within his review of the novel, *England, England* revels in its intertextuality. It is a text that cleverly examines the futility of searching for a lost referent, whilst itself being profoundly inauthentic:

The title of this novel is a contraction (of the famous phrase from W.E. Henley’s ‘Pro Rege Nostro’, ‘What have I done for you, /England, my England’). The dust-jacket is a steal (‘after the Our Counties Jig-Saw Puzzle, Tower Press’). The blurb is a cliché (‘As every schoolboy knows...’: Macaulay out of Auden). The central plot device is borrowed (from Clough Williams-Ellis’s terrible vision in *On Trust for the Nation*). The central character is a composite character (part Robert Maxwell, part Mohamed al-Fayed). The story is as old as the hills (love, betrayal, the search for happiness). The plot structure is both obvious and predictable (a three-parter, with the requisite climaxes and crises), the themes comforting and familiar (the meaning of memory, of nationhood and selfhood), the idiom entirely typical and self-regarding. *England, England*, in other words, is a book which not only poses questions about integrity and authenticity, but is itself something of a poser.<sup>147</sup>

As a novel of the new postmodern tradition, *England, England*’s ‘posing’ is suggestive of the extent to which postmodern concerns have permeated the popular

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<sup>146</sup> An argument that this study, in addressing the myth of 9/11, explores.

<sup>147</sup> Sansom, Ian. ‘Half-Timbering, Homosexuality and Whingeing’ in *London Review of Books* 20.19 (October 1, 1998) <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n19/ian-sansom/half-timbering-homosexuality-and-whingeing>> (accessed 30.11.09)

consciousness, and like Pitman's rendering of history, have been made palatable to the consumer. We might argue, then, that while contemporary fiction exists ostensibly as a manifestation of a *revised* form of postmodernism, it paradoxically has obvious parallels to Jean-François Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern mood; with an apparent penchant for cultural eclecticism, 'art panders to the confusion which reigns in the "taste" of the patrons. [...] Artists, gallery owners, critics and public wallow together in the "anything goes," and the epoch is one of slackening.' Moreover, 'in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield.'<sup>148</sup> While Bradford's dialectical model ensures the partial retention of aesthetic criterion, one could argue that contemporary literary value *is* determined largely by a novel's commercial viability, and subsequent success. This apparent alignment with the theories of Lyotard would seem to suggest that those earlier examples of subversive fiction dubbed 'postmodern', merely marked the manifestation of the nascent stages of the form, and that it is the contemporary mood, and its varied cultural manifestations, that is actually representative of postmodernism proper.

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<sup>148</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism' in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, p.76

## 2. 'The Worldflash of a Coming Future'?

September has always seemed to me a month of beginnings.<sup>149</sup>

In an interview conducted three months after 9/11, Jacques Derrida suggested that 'what is terrible about "September 11," what remains "infinite" in this wound, is that we do not *know* what is and so do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it.'<sup>150</sup> I argued in the previous chapter, via Fredric Jameson, that in order to comprehend the nuances of the postmodern moment, one must necessarily be temporally disassociated from it. In assessing the intricacies of the assumed shift in cultural mood following 9/11, we might conclude that similar criteria apply. Indeed, asked for his response to the terrorist attacks, Jameson expresses his reluctance to comment, 'because the event in question, as history, is incomplete and one can say that it has not yet fully happened.'<sup>151</sup> Following nearly a decade of conjecture and theorising, the interminability of the wound wrought by 9/11 remains omnipresent, and regardless of the numerous studies published interrogating both the events themselves and their subsequent impact upon Western structures of feeling, a coherent (post-)9/11 narrative is yet to emerge. In this sense, we might usefully reappropriate Connor's mapping of the evolution of postmodernism, and conclude that the genesis of the post-9/11 moment is, at the time of writing, stalling in the preliminary stages of 'accumulation'.

Despite the passing of time, the incommensurability of 9/11 ensures that we still do not know how to describe, identify or comprehend it. Certainly, many of the narratives assessing the cultural impact of the events of September 11 resonate with the same sense of cautious pondering that defined early engagements with postmodernism. While many such accounts reinforce the notion that 9/11 provoked the inception of an altered cultural mood, their respective diagnoses of the emergent era remain largely ambiguous. Ian McEwan's assessment of the post-9/11 landscape,

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<sup>149</sup> Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), p.165

<sup>150</sup> Jacques Derrida. 'A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida' in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Giovanna Borradori (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.94

<sup>151</sup> Fredric Jameson, '11 September', Tariq Ali *et al* in *London Review of Books* 23.19 (October 4, 2001)

<<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n19/nine-eleven-writers/11-september>> (accessed 19.07.07)

although conceived within the immediate aftermath, is typical of the paradoxical sense of resolute irresolution that characterises subsequent accounts attempting to define the burgeoning period. In a piece published in *The Guardian* on the day following the terrorist attacks, McEwan, commenting on the ‘sense of denial that accompanies all catastrophes’, remarks that as the global audience watched the events of 9/11 play out before them in disbelief, they quickly realised, ‘though it was too soon to wonder how or why, that the world would never be the same.’<sup>152</sup> It is this notion of indeterminable resolution that broadly sets the tone for the critical assessments of the post-9/11 mood. Such narratives display an unquestionable conviction attesting to the inevitable cultural shift precipitated by 9/11, yet simultaneously express a profound uncertainty as to how such a shift might be manifested. Critics have suggested that the destruction of the World Trade Center marked if not the final demise of an exhausted postmodernism, then the inception of a new global epoch, yet within their respective accounts there is little attempt to formally define the emergent era.<sup>153</sup>

The signifier most commonly used to denote the contemporary cultural climate is the logical, but somewhat unsatisfactory, ‘post-9/11’. As Rebecca Mead comments, the designator is ‘an unswinging if otherwise apposite sobriquet,’<sup>154</sup> yet defined only by its temporal relationship to an event that remains largely incomprehensible, ‘post-9/11’ remains a fundamentally meaningless term. In provoking the assumption that every cultural product created after September 11, 2001 is essentially determined by, or a response to, the event itself, the designator fails to reflect the nuances of the cultural landscape during the first decade of the twentieth century (a collective name which Mead surmises is ‘gratifyingly lacking in cuteness but may be too wordy for practicality’<sup>155</sup>). Indeed, we might argue, as Slavoj Žižek does, that the ubiquitous, or rather, mythologized belief that the events of 9/11 engendered an irrevocable shift in the cultural mood, is itself a claim which, based on little more than conjecture, is essentially meaningless. He considers:

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<sup>152</sup> Ian McEwan, ‘Beyond Belief’ in *Guardian* (September 12, 2001)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/12/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety>> (accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>153</sup> Of course, studies proposing a replacement philosophy for an exhausted postmodernism, are neither limited to the post-9/11 moment, nor are they necessarily defined by it. For a succinct summary of some of the pretenders to postmodernism’s throne, see Alan Kirby’s article, ‘Successor States to an Empire in Free Fall’ in *Times Higher Education* (May 27, 2010)  
<<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=411731>> (accessed 01.07.10)

<sup>154</sup> Rebecca Mead, ‘What Do You Call It?’ in *The New Yorker* (January 4, 2010)  
<[http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/01/04/100104taco\\_talk\\_mead](http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/01/04/100104taco_talk_mead)> (accessed 01.07.10)

<sup>155</sup> Ibid



What about the phrase which reverberates everywhere: ‘Nothing will ever be the same after September 11’? Significantly, this phrase is never further elaborated – it is just an empty gesture of saying something ‘deep’ without really knowing what we want to say. So our first reaction to it should be: Really? What if, precisely, nothing epochal happened on September 11?<sup>156</sup>

That such claims have permeated the contemporary consciousness, despite them amounting to little more than empty gestures, attests to the power of myth as a disseminator of knowledge. As Said illustrates in his account addressing the commonly perceived fierceness of lions, each individual proclamation might be conceived as a self-fulfilling prophecy that reinforces, or naturalises, the claim which it seeks to outline. That the belief that 9/11 initiated a profound cultural shift has such currency within the contemporary consciousness, despite being accompanied by little or no substantiating evidence, emphasises the extent to which, as an epochal event, it has been successfully mythologized. What is profoundly problematic about the construction of 9/11 as myth, is precisely that which Žižek outlines: its myth is rarely questioned; while ‘our first reaction’ to the phrase ‘nothing will ever be the same after September 11’ *should* be ‘really?’, it rarely is. Implicit to his account is the suggestion that as an event of such magnitude, we, as contemporary subjects, need to say something about 9/11, to try and comprehend it, yet are unable to formulate a cogent response due to its close temporal proximity. As Kathy Smith argues, ‘although the date itself is already “history”, we are still in a process of uncertainty,’ for ‘it is too soon to frame it objectively.’<sup>157</sup> Within such a moment of uncertainty, it is seemingly far simpler to ascribe to the myth than to challenge its legitimacy.

It is precisely these concerns that will be explored within this chapter. In offering analyses of examples of contemporary fiction written after 9/11, alongside considerations of the journalistic and critical accounts that diagnose the emergence of a new cultural mood, I explore the extent to which the projected myth of 9/11 is manifested in, and indeed contested by, the subsequent literature published. Moreover, in situating Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* (1991) as an urtext, I assess the extent to

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<sup>156</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Reappropriations: The Lesson of Mullah Omar’ in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), p.46

<sup>157</sup> Kathy Smith, ‘The Emptiness of Zero: Representations of Loss, Absence, Anxiety and Desire in the Late Twentieth Century’ in *Critical Quarterly* 46.1 (April 2004)  
<<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.0011-1562.2004.00547.x/pdf>> (accessed 25.07.07)

which the novel seemingly anticipates 9/11 and its presumed cultural impact, and moreover explore the degree to which the concerns outlined by the novel are manifested within the fictions of the post-9/11 moment.

## 2.1 On or About September 11, 2001...

Reflecting in 1924 on the cultural shift evidenced ‘on or about December 1910’, Virginia Woolf comments that ‘all human relations have shifted. [...] And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature.’<sup>158</sup> Generally perceived as the moment in which modernist sensibilities belatedly reached British shores, Woolf contends in ‘Character in Fiction’ that the shift seen in British society since 1910, or thereabouts, engenders an associated transition within the politics of representation. As Sara Blair suggests, ‘the accession of George V to the throne (1910), increasingly visible public demonstrations mounted by militant suffragists and labour leaders, and the rise of the Labour party in national politics, culminating in the achievement of the first Labour government in 1923’, all resulted in the second decade of the twentieth century being defined by its breaking away from the conventions of Victorian conservatism.<sup>159</sup> For Woolf, such a profound shift in the social fabric meant that traditional cultural forms were no longer able to reflect adequately the complexities and contradictions of the emergent society. A sentiment that would later be echoed by Fredric Jameson in his account of postmodernism, Woolf’s essay emphasises ‘how serious a matter it is when the tools of one generation are useless for the next’ (p.48).

Developed from her essay ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ (1923), through ‘Character in Fiction’ Woolf responds to Arnold Bennett’s critique of her novel *Jacob’s Room* (1922), outlined in his article ‘Is the Novel Decaying?’. Published in *Cassell’s Weekly*, March 1923, Bennett positions Woolf’s novel as representative of an emergent tradition of fictions that ‘attach too much weight to cleverness, which is perhaps,’ he argues, ‘the lowest of all artistic qualities.’ He suggests that crucial to the longevity of any novel is the means through which its characters are represented: ‘if

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<sup>158</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Character in Fiction’ in *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), p.38

<sup>159</sup> Sara Blair, ‘Modernism and the Politics of Culture’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.163

the characters are real the novel will have a chance; if they are not oblivion will be its portion.’ *Jacob’s Room*, Bennett contends, perfectly encapsulates the decaying state of the Georgian novel. While he acknowledges that the text is ‘packed and bursting with originality’ and moreover is ‘exquisitely written’, Bennett asserts that the manner in which Woolf privileges style over content ensures that her characters lack the authenticity required to elevate the novel from making ‘a great stir in a small world’ to impressing itself ‘upon the discriminating few and the less discriminating many.’<sup>160</sup>

Within the initial sections of her essay, Woolf expresses agreement with Bennett’s claims: she too suggests that characterisation is integral to a novel’s success, arguing that ‘it is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic and alive, has been evolved’ (p.42). Moreover, questioning why it is ‘so hard for novelists at present to create characters which seem real, not only to Mr Bennett, but to the world at large,’ Woolf similarly highlights the crisis in representation that characterises the fiction of the new century. Rather than attributing the origins of the crisis to the emergent fiction of the Georgian novelists, however, she contends that the blame lies firmly with the Edwardians, and argues that the Edwardian novelists, of which Bennett is an exemplar, ‘were never interested in character in itself; or in the book in itself. They were interested in something outside’ (pp.43-44). Drawing from her previously expressed anecdote of Mrs Brown travelling in a train carriage – ‘Here is Mrs Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her’ (p.42) – Woolf argues that the Edwardian form of characterisation practised particularly by Bennett, H.G. Wells and John Galsworthy, is both too outmoded and artificial to reflect the idiosyncrasies of early twentieth-century subjectivity. She suggests that rather than focusing on character, the Edwardian novelists are so concerned with the mimetic gesture of fiction, in ensuring that their reader believes in the characters, that should they seek to portray Mrs Brown, they would look ‘very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature’ (pp.48-49).

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<sup>160</sup> Arnold Bennett, ‘Is the Novel Decaying’ in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, eds. Robin Majumdar, Robin & Allen McLaurin (1975; London: Routledge, 1999), pp.112-113

With the societal shift from Edwardian to Georgian sensibilities, the author writing after 1910 finds himself, Woolf suggests, in a difficult predicament; for with ‘Mrs Brown protesting that she was different, quite different, from what people made out [...] luring the novelist to her rescue by the most fascinating if fleeting glimpse of her charms’, the Georgian author has nothing but the inherited tools of the Edwardians to render her ‘real’<sup>161</sup>. It is precisely this predicament that engenders the crisis in representation seen at the beginning of the twentieth century, characterised by Woolf by ‘the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction’ as authors strive to establish a new ‘code of manners’ more appropriate to the emergent social landscape (p.51).

In seeking to assess the cultural impact of 9/11, many commentators have drawn parallels between the shift in sensibility seen at the beginning of the twentieth century, which broadly reflected the transition from ‘realist’ to ‘modernist’ modes of representation, to the assumed cultural rupturing precipitated by the events of September 11 – which for those drawing the analogy, marked the transition from postmodernist modes of representation to something as yet indefinable. Reflecting on the global significance of the events, Margaret Drabble, writing in December 2001, aligns the newly emerged post-9/11 environment with the inception of modernism. As is immediately clear from its tagline, ‘Margaret Drabble on a Global Sea-Change’, the article is one of many that situates 9/11 as an epochal event. Exploring the extent to which the terrorist attacks constituted such a ‘sea-change’, Drabble comments, ‘I’ve never worked out why Virginia Woolf said human nature changed in 1910, or if I did I’ve forgotten, but something certainly changed this year. A new insecurity kicked in.’ The iconography of the attack on the World Trade Center undoubtedly reflects an attack on the sacrosanctity of Western capitalism. As Drabble observes, prior to 9/11 ‘capitalism had never seemed so secure [...] Then, in a day, in hours, the story changed [ ...] Suddenly, what had seemed invulnerable was transformed into all that was fragile and mortal.’<sup>162</sup> The shift in perceptions of capitalism elicited by 9/11, from impenetrability to vulnerability, is broadly reflective of an associated transition

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<sup>161</sup> She suggests that the early works of E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence fall victim to this predicament, with both writers seeming reluctant to throw away the now obsolete tools of Edwardianism, instead seeking to forge a compromise between ‘their own direct sense of the oddity and significance of some character’ and the depersonalised practice of Edwardian characterisation (pp.50-51).

<sup>162</sup> Margaret Drabble, ‘Glass Houses’ in *Guardian* (December 24, 2001)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/dec/24/september11.politics>> (accessed 06.07.07)

in ‘human character,’ from relative security to a pervasive insecurity. For Drabble, the events of 9/11 served to deconstruct the unassailability of Western society, and emphasised that which, residually, we already knew: that human beings, and indeed humanity collectively, are vulnerable. Indeed, she defines the new world order as being initially characterised by an acute insecurity, which over time diminishes to a banal, yet all-pervasive, anxiety; she remarks, ‘I hadn’t foreseen September 11 but it was remarkable how soon it became just one more of those things to worry about.’ As is suggestive of the designator ‘post-9/11’, everything following September 11, is seemingly filtered through both the event and the West’s (and the individual’s) reaction to it.

Applying Woolfian logic, the shift in human character precipitated by the events of 9/11 is necessarily reflected in an associated transition in the mood and style of literature written after 2001 – and certainly it is a concern of this study to assess the extent to which such a hypothesis might be verifiable; yet as Pankaj Mishra contends, such an analogy is perhaps too reductive, in that it focuses rather too much on the presumed similarities between the literature published after 1910 and that written after 9/11, and as a means to draw the parallel, seemingly ignores the profound differences in mood. Responding to Amis’s (hyperbolic) claim that ‘after a couple of hours at their desks, on September 12, 2001, all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change in occupation,’<sup>163</sup> Mishra’s article assesses the extent to which the events of 9/11 impacted upon contemporary British and American literature. He argues that ‘on September 11, terrorists from the Middle East who destroyed American immunity to large-scale violence and chaos also forced many American and British novelists to reconsider the value of their work and its relation to the history of the present.’ The need to reassess the social and historical significance of literature in light of 9/11 is perhaps suggestive of a crisis in representation that is broadly homologous to that which occurred in 1910. Indeed, in situating the post-9/11 mood as a moment of problematic uncertainty, Mishra evokes the parallel with the cultural shift that characterised the period immediately following the First World War, where ‘writers had to develop new resources [...] to try to describe how and why human relations had altered in the new conditions of modern life.’ An analysis of various post-9/11 texts – such as Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, McEwan’s *Saturday*, Safran

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<sup>163</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The Voice of the Lonely Crowd’ in *Guardian* (June 1, 2002)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jun/01/philosophy.society>> (accessed 06.07.07)

Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* – however, leads him to conclude that the portrayal of the event as either 'raw physical essence' or mere backdrop, demonstrates that 'the 9/11 writers couldn't be more different from Mann, Musil and many others in Europe for whom the First World War, though an unprecedented calamity, was the point of departure for an investigation of the ideologies, beliefs, and social and political structures of their societies.'<sup>164</sup> Rather than offering such totalising investigations of the current mood, Mishra argues that the fictions, particularly of DeLillo, McInerney and McEwan, instead retreat into the domestic realm, and in so doing refuse to address the 'big' sociological and political questions provoked by the attacks. Moreover, despite the multitude of articles forewarning of an impending crisis in representation<sup>165</sup>, he contends that the post-9/11 novel, as yet, displays little evidence of the 'self-examination' and historical revisionism proclaimed necessary by McInerney *et al.* The 'as yet' is crucial to his argument, for just as Woolf suggests that the period immediately proceeding 1910 is defined by a relative uncertainty as novelists struggle to establish a new code of manners, so Mishra proposes that 'recent novels may turn out to be only the first draft of a rich literature,'<sup>166</sup> which will inevitably develop as 9/11, with the passing of time, becomes increasingly disconnected, temporally and emotionally, from the present.

## 2.2 Impatient Periodisation: Defining the Post-9/11 Mood

Writing in 2007, Amis emphasises how the contemporary moment is defined by a fundamental uncertainty, as 'six years later, we are still learning how to think and feel

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<sup>164</sup> Pankaj Mishra, 'The End of Innocence' in *Guardian* (May 19, 2007)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/19/fiction.martinamis>> (accessed 28.06.10)

<sup>165</sup> Jay McInerney asserts that 'most novelists I know went through a period of intense self-examination and self-loathing after the attacks on the World Trade Center' as 'the idea of "invented characters" and alternate realities seemed trivial and frivolous and suddenly, horribly outdated' ('The Uses of Invention' in *Guardian*, September 17, 2005 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/sep/17/fiction.vsnaiipaul>> ,accessed 06.07.07); Martin Amis contends that overnight, 'the work in progress had been reduced [...] to a blue streak of pitiable babble' ('The Voice of the Lonely Crowd'); and DeLillo suggests that while 'we like to think that America invented the future [...] there are disturbances now , in large and small ways, a chain of reconsiderations' ('In the Ruins of the Future' in *Guardian*, December 22, 2001 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo>> (accessed 06.07.07).

<sup>166</sup> Pankaj Mishra, 'The End of Innocence'

about September 11,<sup>167</sup> and indeed, the belief that contemporary authors are too immersed within the post-9/11 moment to critically analyse it effectively, is reiterated throughout many of the articles and studies engaging with the cultural impact of the attacks. Despite such concerns, however, the need to periodise 9/11 as an epochal moment that precipitated the emergence of an altered global mood, was evident almost instantaneously, and certainly attempts to historicise it as such continue to define later assessments of the contemporary moment. There is a pervasive sense that only in historicising the moment, or to borrow Jameson's term, 'to name the system', can we begin to comprehend 9/11 and make intelligible the emergent culture that hangs within its shadow. In an article that addresses the theoretical and political implications of periodising it, Adam Lowenstein notes the impatient need within Western society to historicise, and thus make knowable, the event:

Barely two months after 11 September 2001, the *New York Times* ran a feature story concerning the emergence of museum exhibits across New York City devoted to representing 9/11. The story's headline is 'History Is Impatient to Embrace Sept.11.' Today [...] this impatience to periodise 9/11, to construct it as 'history', is more powerful than ever. Even if those heady early days after the attacks, when 'cultural prognosticators' announced an end to 'the age of irony' [...] may now seem somewhat distant and alien, the desire to posit 9/11 as the end or the beginning of an era does not. So we find ourselves wondering, in our own ways and with our own words, whether 9/11 is a modern or a modernist event? A postmodern or postmodernist event? Or perhaps the end of postmodernism all together and the arrival of a certain kind of globality.<sup>168</sup>

The periodisation of 9/11 as an historical event is interesting, not least because it effectively serves to transform the realities of the incident into the ideological catalyst that provokes the inception of a new 'post-postmodern' cultural mood. Such reductive conclusions are seemingly substantiated by the repeated exclamations attesting to the new post-9/11 world order, where Blake Morrison's comments seem

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<sup>167</sup> Martin Amis, 'September 11' in *The Second Plane. September 11: 2001-2007* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p.198 [Originally published as '9/11 and the Cult of Death' in *The Times*, September 11, 2007]

<sup>168</sup> Adam Lowenstein, 'Cinema, Benjamin, and the allegorical representation of September 11' in *Critical Quarterly* 45.1-2 <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8705.00477/pdf>> (accessed 25.07.07)

typical: ‘We’re in a new age now. When the dust clears, the scary new order will appear.’<sup>169</sup> As epochal designator, the physical destruction of the World Trade Center has clear parallels with the events contributing to the fatal demise of modernism. ‘Modern architecture,’ announces Charles Jencks, ‘died in St Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3.32pm (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final *coup de grace* by dynamite.’<sup>170</sup> As Sean Matthews argues, the ‘terrible epochal events’ of 9/11 might similarly be conceived as marking the death of postmodernism, for ‘from the rubble of Manhattan one startling, emblematic coincidence emerges: the architect of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, Minoru Yamasaki, was also the designer of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.’<sup>171</sup>

While Matthews’ symbolic alignment of the destruction of the World Trade Center with the ‘final *coup de grace*’ of postmodernism neatly draws the cultural moment of the late twentieth century to a close<sup>172</sup>, as with Jencks’ formulation of the death of modernism, the appropriation of the image as an iconographical cultural marker might need to be questioned. As outlined in the previous chapter, a postmodern tradition was established and reflected within both British and American fiction prior to the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing scheme in 1972, and similarly, we might contend that those themes and motifs thought to be attributed to the ‘post-9/11’ mood are evident within Western cultural manifestations prior to the destruction of the World Trade Center. While the iconography of the demolition of both the Pruitt-Igoe scheme and the Twin Towers suggests the symbolic collapse of modernist and postmodernist ideologies, as historical markers their usefulness in designating the inception of altered cultural moods is clearly debateable. It might be argued, then, that rather than provoking the emergence of a new cultural mood, theoretical and fictional responses to 9/11 serve instead to emphasise the already-

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<sup>169</sup> Blake Morrison, ‘We Weren’t There for Troy or the Burning of Rome. This Time There Were Cameras’ in *Guardian* (September 14, 2001)

<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/writersreflections/story/0,,557431,00.html>> (accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>170</sup> Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* 6<sup>th</sup> edn (1991; London: Academy Editions, 1996), p.23

<sup>171</sup> Sean Matthews, ‘Postmodernism’ in *The Continuum Encyclopedia of British Literature*, eds. Steven Serafin & Valerie Grosvenor Myer (London: Continuum, 2003), p.785

<sup>172</sup> Andreas Huyssen also observes the parallel between the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe housing scheme and the World Trade Center, concluding that ‘only time will tell whether the collapse of the Twin Towers will generate imaginative alternatives for an urban restructuring of the southern tip of Manhattan’ (‘Twin Memories: Afterimages of Nine/Eleven’ in *Grey Room* No.7: On 9/11, Spring, 2002).



existing post-postmodern mood. Indeed, as is implicit to Matthews' observation, perhaps the parallel is only coincidental.

In an essay that assesses the political and philosophical impact of the West's attempt to historicise 9/11, Anustup Basu outlines the distinction between 'the event' and 'the phenomenon'. Defining the latter as that which 'offer[s] a field of semblances that lend to an already existing coda of re-presentation,' he argues that, perceived as a phenomenon, 9/11 is positioned within a continuum of historical moments that reiterate the West's 'enduring battle of liberalism against forces of "evil."' Within this formulation the individual complexities of 9/11 are reduced to a generic response, which in evoking a collective narrative of American trauma, ensures that the 'incident should remind us, in a categorical manner, only about Pearl Harbor.' In contrast, the 'event' is defined as:

[A] singularity precisely because it explodes established correspondences between semblance and representation. [...] The event does not lodge itself inside a gap in the continuum of history, but blasts it open altogether. [...] As a working postulate, we can say that the event is that which invites a radical questioning of the world; attention to it perpetually clears the ground for new thought.<sup>173</sup>

The myth of 9/11 is clearly dependent upon its interpretation as an 'event', and certainly, it is this positioning that engenders the widely held assumption that September 11 provoked the inception of an altered global mood.<sup>174</sup> Indeed, as a global event, it remains largely incomprehensible since it refuses to be positioned comfortably within an historical continuum; 'in its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity.'<sup>175</sup> Moreover, perceived in this way, the proposed parallels between the cultural shift experienced on or about December 1910, that occurring on July 15, 1972, and that alleged to have transpired on September 11,

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<sup>173</sup> Anustup Basu, 'The State of Security and Warfare of Demons' in *Critical Quarterly* 45.1-2 (July, 2003) <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8705.00469/pdf>> (accessed 25.07.07)

<sup>174</sup> Baudrillard similarly contends that the West has experienced few 'symbolic events on a world scale', yet that 'with the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, we might even be said to have before us the absolute event, the "mother" of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have ever taken place' ('The Spirit of Terrorism' in *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays* tr. Chris Turner (2002; London: Verso, 2006), pp.3-4). An event of such magnitude, it is perhaps unsurprising that articles and studies assessing the cultural impact of 9/11 should be framed around such 'radical questioning[s] of the world.'

<sup>175</sup> Don DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future'

2001, become increasingly apparent, and give credence to those claims aligning the death of postmodernism with 9/11; those examinations of the cultural impact of the event effectively ‘clear the [postmodern] ground for new thought.’

In the introduction to this study I suggested, via Barthes, that the myth functions by creating a false consciousness, whereby the concerns and observations of history are evaporated by the repeated iteration of a projected belief. Such would certainly appear to be the case with the myth of 9/11. While such an unprecedented event will inevitably impact upon the cultural realm, to equate the terminal demise of postmodernism with the transition from a pre-9/11 to a post-9/11 culture, however, seems far too reductive a formulation that fails to acknowledge recent literary and cultural history. Rather, the alleged emergence of an altered post-9/11 mood might better be conceived as the intense manifestation of already existing concerns. Furthermore, that this hyper-manifestation might only be a transient response to the presumed crisis in representation precipitated by the terrorist attacks, and therefore fail to equate to the inception of a lasting shift in the cultural mood, is a premise that is seemingly obscured by the omnipresent myth of 9/11.

In an article which is broadly representative of the concerns expressed by many authors, James Wood forewarns of an uncertain period in literary production following 9/11, arguing that ‘surely, for a while, novelists will be leery of setting themselves up as analysts of society, while society bucks and changes so helplessly.’ Such a prognosis, however, while reflective of the emergent hesitancy that characterised the immediate post-9/11 environment, seems to have been misplaced for, despite initial concerns regarding the continued significance of the novel within the post-9/11 landscape, a rich corpus of literature has emerged within the years following the event. Illustrating the manner in which the concerns of literature would necessarily be altered by 9/11, Wood questions: ‘Who would dare to be knowledgeable about politics and society now? Is it possible to imagine Don DeLillo today writing his novel *Mao II* – a novel that proposed the foolish notion that the terrorist now does what the novelist used to do, that is, “alter the life of the culture”?’<sup>176</sup>

Published within the month following the event, Wood’s diagnosis of the emergent post-9/11 mood is perhaps representative of those initial accounts that both constitute, and are determined by, the myth of 9/11. Indeed, his positioning of *Mao II*

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<sup>176</sup> James Wood, ‘Tell Me How Does it Feel?’ in *Guardian* (October 6, 2001) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/oct/06/fiction>> (accessed 06.07.07)

(1991) as illustrative of the type of fiction that is no longer conceivable within the post-9/11 climate is interesting, for it suggests a very clear distinction between the self-reflexive fiction of the pre-9/11 postmodern moment, and the envisaged fictional forms of the emergent post-9/11 culture; there is a sense that in reflecting the altered mood, the literature of the post-9/11 moment demands an increased solemnity that is seemingly at odds with the playfulness and superficiality of postmodernism. I would suggest, however, that the belief that the writing of such a novel as *Mao II* is inconceivable within the post-9/11 environment, is a fallacy engendered by the myth itself. Certainly, as will be explored below, DeLillo's novel emerges as an extremely intriguing text, since it offers a distillation of many of the themes and motifs that would later be attributed to the fiction of the emergent post-9/11 culture. Indeed, a consideration of the novel will provide a useful framework through which the tropes of post-9/11 fiction can be interrogated, and the myth of 9/11 deconstructed; for it seems that in exploring the post-9/11 moment, one must paradoxically look back to the postmodern tradition.

### 2.3 Framing Post-9/11 Fiction: The Four Prophecies of *Mao II*

Eventually the towers will seem human and local and quirky. Give them time.<sup>177</sup>

In his assessment of the novel, Peter Boxall suggests that 'through the operations of a kind of reverse déjà vu – a narratological, historical and psychological phenomenon that has a powerful resonance in DeLillo's writing – it is the pressure of 2001 that exerts itself most forcefully as we enter into the 1990s, and into DeLillo's *Mao II*.' Indeed, he comments that such is the novel's impossibly anachronistic engagement with both the events of 9/11 and the West's reaction to it, that it becomes inconceivable to recall how the text might have been interpreted prior to 2001. This is a novel, he argues, that both intuits and is refracted by, the future: 'the novel reads now as if it is preparing, in advance, a way of reading and articulating both the events of September 11, and the "new world order" that comes in their wake.'<sup>178</sup> That, in

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<sup>177</sup> Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1992), p.39

<sup>178</sup> Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p.157

the days and weeks following 9/11, the publication of such a novel within the altered landscape seemed inconceivable, reinforces the mythological status of 9/11 as epochal marker; yet that *Mao II* has a continuing resonance nine years after the terrorist attacks, and nineteen years after its original publication, suggests a continuation of theme and novelistic concern that transcend the assumed cultural rupturing precipitated by 9/11. Clearly, fictional texts can continue to remain relevant long after their being conceived, yet *Mao II* is seemingly so attuned to the concerns of the literature published after 9/11, that in considering the novel alongside examples of contemporary fiction, it becomes increasingly difficult to justify claims asserting that the event provoked a profound shift in cultural mood; and while one text alone cannot, of course, be thought to be illustrative of the complex, and often contradictory, nuances of a specific mood or era, *Mao II* nonetheless offers an interesting framework through which the specific motifs attributed to post-9/11 fiction can be interrogated. As a means to highlight the prophetic nature of DeLillo's novel, I will briefly outline four of its key themes, before interrogating how the respective motifs seemingly foreshadow the cultural concerns that would define the post-9/11 climate.

*Prophecy I: The Transcendence of the Disaster Narrative and the Diminished Significance of Literature*

Central to DeLillo's narrative is the perennial debate exploring the social significance of literature and the associated responsibilities placed upon the author. *Mao II* follows the reclusive Bill Gray as he struggles to complete the novel that he has been writing and rewriting for the past twenty-three years. Living in a self-imposed exile with Karen (a recovering member of the Unification Church) and his personal assistant Scott Martineau (an ardent reader of Gray's work), the novel consciously engages with the theories of the death of the author, and interrogates the problematic status of the writer who lives in an age in which he is both revered and deemed socially irrelevant.<sup>179</sup> Within the novel literature is intermittently attributed with the capacity

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<sup>179</sup> Indeed, the extent to which *Mao II* simultaneously engages with, and deconstructs Barthes' theory of the death of the author, is perhaps suggestive of its positioning within the new postmodern tradition. Certainly, as with much fiction of the new postmodern tradition, the novel playfully engages with the theoretical assumptions of postmodernism, at once substantiating Barthes' theory only to subvert it later. Barthes argues, for instance, that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' ('The Death of the Author', p.148), a notion that is seemingly corroborated by the relationship between Scott and Gray; indeed Scott's 'journey out of nonbeing' (p.57) is initiated by his reading of

of being able to imbue significance to a fundamentally meaningless world<sup>180</sup>, yet the overwhelming notion that resonates throughout the narrative, and indeed that which pervades meditations on the emergent post-9/11 culture, is the belief that literature has little relevance to a world overwhelmed by terrorism. Outlining Gray's 'idea that writers are being consumed by the emergence of news as an apocalyptic force', Scott sardonically asserts:

The novel used to feed our search for meaning. Quoting Bill. It was the great secular transcendence. The Latin mass of language, character, occasional new truth. But our desperation has led us toward something larger and darker. So we turn to the news, which provides an unremitting mood of catastrophe. This is where we find emotional experience not available elsewhere. We don't need the novel. Quoting Bill. We don't even need catastrophes, necessarily. We only need the reports and predictions and warnings (p.72).

Within the contemporary moment, Arnoldian theories of the transcendent powers of literature to provide moral sustenance and knowledge to a largely secular society<sup>181</sup> are displaced, and meaning instead is sought within the disaster narrative; more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to the narrative of disaster to interpret life for us.

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Gray's first novel, a book which he describes as being 'about me somehow' (p.51), and is subsequently defined by his easing of 'the writer's beleaguering' (p.61), and his becoming complicit to the Gray's spectral existence. Barthes further contends that 'writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' ('The Death of the Author', p.142). *Mao II* seemingly subverts this notion since it is the very act of writing that maintains and defines Gray's subjectivity. He asserts: 'The language of books has shaped me as a man. There's a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right. It speaks the writer's will to live.' Moreover, while he recognises that the continual revisions made to his twenty-three year old novel have overworked and confused his sense of self – 'I no longer see myself in the language – and have rendered the novel 'dead', he justifies his unremitting inability to complete the book as a conscious act that enables him to remain alive: He admits to Brita that 'the book's been done for two years. But I rewrite pages and then revise in detail. I write to survive now, to keep my heart beating' (p.48). Such a volitional effort to ensure the (self-) assertion of identity is, for Gray, essential within a culture in which literature, and subsequently the figure of the author, possess a diminished social relevance.

<sup>180</sup> George Haddad (a representative for the Maoist group responsible for the poet's kidnapping), considers Gray's potential as a Maoist, arguing that he 'would have written what the culture needed in order to see itself' and moreover 'would have seen the need for an absolute being, a way out of weakness and confusion' (p.163).

<sup>181</sup> See Matthew Arnold's seminal essay 'The Study of Poetry', originally published in 1880 as the 'General Introduction' to Thomas Humphry Ward's edited collection *The English Poets – Early Poetry: Chaucer to Donne, Vol. 1*.

Turning his back on his exiled existence, although remaining largely incognito, Gray re-enters wider society and, in meeting with his former publisher Charles Everson, becomes central to a plot designed to force the release of Jean-Claude Julien, a Swiss poet captured by Beirut terrorists. Abandoning the original plan to speak at a press conference on behalf of the poet, Gray travels to Lebanon hoping to be able to negotiate with the terrorists in person. En route, the author constructs a fictional narrative, detailing Jean-Claude's enforced captivity – clearly conceived as a juxtaposition to Gray's own self-enforced seclusion – as a means to 'bring him back, to return a meaning that had been lost to the world when they locked him in that room' (p.200). Struck by a car in Cyprus that eventually leads to his death, Gray never reaches Beirut, and while the eventual fate of Jean-Claude remains undisclosed, Gray's gesture to reconstruct him through fictional narrative ultimately remains incomplete. Indeed, as a means to return that which has been lost within the contemporary world, the novel suggests that it is the narratives of terror and disaster, rather than literature, that furnish individuals with meaning.

The conflicting tensions established between the narratives of disaster and those of fiction are explored throughout *Mao II*, and clearly have interesting implications when read alongside those texts written in response to 9/11. Indeed, when considering the literary and societal impact of the event, the novel emerges as a very significant, albeit somewhat problematic, subtext, since many of its concerns are paralleled in the accounts penned by authors during the aftermath of the attacks. Certainly, the basis of DeLillo's claim, in a journalistic piece written in December 2001, that 'today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists'<sup>182</sup>, would seem to rest upon the already established tension between the terrorist and the novelist as outlined by Gray:

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. [...] Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness (p.41).

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<sup>182</sup> Don DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future' in *Guardian* (December 22, 2001) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo>> (accessed 06.07.07)

For Haddad, the relationship between the novelist and the terrorist is more intricately woven than Gray's, and DeLillo's, formulation suggests. Responding to Gray's bewilderment regarding Jean-Claude's captor's choice of target, Haddad appeals to the author's reason, asking him 'isn't it the novelist [...] above all people, above all writers, who understands this rage, who knows in his soul what the terrorist thinks and feels?' (p.130). For Gray, however, the tension that binds the two figures is essentially one of displacement; for while he resolutely believes that 'a writer creates a character as a way to reveal consciousness, increase the flow of meaning' (p.200), he simultaneously acknowledges the diminishing significance of the author within contemporary society, arguing that 'what terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought' (p.157). Implicit to the novel is the notion that whereas once literature might have been thought to possess a clear moral and social function, within the contemporary moment individuals seek meaning and guidance from elsewhere. As Gray contends, 'news of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative' (p.42); a sentiment that, as will be explored below, resonates within the post-9/11 moment.

*Prophecy II: Terror as the Only Meaningful Act in a Meaningless World*

In an attempt to extend Gray's hypothesis of the contemporary demise of the author, Haddad suggests that terrorists are 'the only possible heroes for our time.' Justifying his seemingly nonsensical statement, he argues that within 'societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act.' Within contemporary society where 'there's too much everything, more things and messages and meanings than we can use in ten thousand lifetimes,' everything, including art, is absorbed by culture to the point that it no longer has any real impact (p.157). Implicit to Haddad's suggestion is the notion that terror is an inevitable response to the vacuity that characterises postmodern society. Certainly his description of a society that is so overrun with meaning as to be essentially meaningless, has obvious parallels with Baudrillard's diagnosis of the postmodern condition, characterised for him by 'a world in which there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.'<sup>183</sup> For Haddad the

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<sup>183</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.79

only remedy to displace the fundamental meaninglessness of postmodern society is the re-legitimation of the metanarrative. Asked by Gray of the motivations behind the Maoist group that he is seen to represent, he explains their ideology and his commitment to it, by suggesting that contemporary society demands ‘a figure of absolute being. [...] In societies struggling to remake themselves, total politics, total authority, total being’ (p.158). Indeed, just as Basu contends that ‘the event is that which invites a radical questioning of the world’, so Haddad suggests that it is precisely through the assertion of such totalising politics that meaning can be generated from the substanceless void that characterises postmodern society.

Margaret Scanlan argues that *Mao II* portrays ‘the desire for fundamentalism, for purity of doctrine and strong authorities who override the fragmented contradictory self.’<sup>184</sup> Certainly, the novel implies that only the terrorist, as perpetrator of such ‘purity of doctrine,’ resists the meaningless vacuity of contemporary culture; his desire for fundamentalism, for meaning and truth, ensures that ‘the terrorist stands outside’ such incorporation, for ‘the culture hasn’t figured out how to assimilate him’ (p.57). Moreover, it is paradoxically the destructive act of terrorism, or rather the assertion of purity of doctrine, that imbues meaning to a meaningless society, rupturing the social fabric and opening up the space for contemplation. Such a notion seemingly foreshadows the concerns expressed following the events of 9/11, as critics and theorists assessed the spirit of terrorism. Baudrillard argued in 2002 that ‘it is the tactic of the terrorist model to bring about an excess of reality, and have the system collapse beneath that excess of reality.’<sup>185</sup> While the notion of terrorism engendering the systemic collapse of a society might need to be questioned – although the collapse of the Twin Towers is emblematic of the sudden vulnerability of Western capitalism, the attacks of 9/11 failed to precipitate the implosion of the American system – the events of September 11 were nonetheless characterised by a sudden surfeit of reality that provoked, albeit momentarily, a need to reassess the inherent meaninglessness that defined postmodern existence. Moreover, as Haddad glibly comments, it is the act of terrorism that imbues identity to the otherwise inconsequential individual: ‘you are nonpersons for the moment, victims without an audience. Get killed and maybe they will notice you’ (p.130). Certainly, the sentiment that resonates throughout the

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<sup>184</sup> Margaret Scanlan, *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p.26

<sup>185</sup> Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Spirit of Terrorism’, p.18



novel is that which is increasingly scrutinised within the contemporary, post-9/11 moment: 'Terror makes the new future possible' (p.235).

*Prophecy III: The Age of Anxiety*

In a study that assesses the 'culture of fear' that characterises Western subjectivity, Barry Glassner, writing in 1999, suggests that the cause of such heightened anxieties is often attributed to premillennial tensions. He notes that 'the final years of a millennium and the early years of a new millennium provoke mass anxiety and ill reasoning. [...] So momentous does the calendric change seem, the populace cannot keep its wits about it.'<sup>186</sup> While acknowledging the millennium hypothesis – he further substantiates such a notion by observing the historical precedence for such premillennial tensions, citing the "panic terror" in Europe around the year 1000 and the witch hunts in Salem in the 1690s' – he reasons that calendric change cannot account for why certain fears are specific to certain moments, and so proposes a more feasible explanation, suggesting that the contemporary culture of fear might be rationalised with a consideration of the contemporary news media. Similarly to Baudrillard's conception of the 'implosion of meaning in the media', Glassner contends that the dissemination of knowledge transmitted through the media is of such intensity that it engenders within the viewer a pervasive, although largely illogical, anxiety. Drawing from research conducted by Emory University, he asserts that 'we have so many fears, many of them off-base [...] because the media bombard us with sensationalistic stories designed to increase ratings.'<sup>187</sup> Indeed, the researchers found that there was an inverse relationship in coverage, whereby those sensational items, or rather those stories that would induce a greater sense of anxiety in its viewers, received significantly more coverage than those reports that, while newsworthy, were considered more mundane.<sup>188</sup> Such is the legitimising authority of

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<sup>186</sup> Substantiating such a hypothesis, he observes the historical precedence for such premillennial tensions, citing the "panic terror" in Europe around the year 1000 and the witch hunts in Salem in the 1690s.'

<sup>187</sup> Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, Tenth Anniversary Edn (New York: Perseus Books, 2009), p.xxviii

<sup>188</sup> In assessing the coverage given to considerations of major health issues within a number of magazines and newspapers, researchers found that there was an inverse relationship, whereby the more shocking causes of death, such as homicide and drug abuse, were given equal, and sometimes greater, coverage than the more common, and unremarkable, cause such as ill-health and heart disease (pp.xxviii-xxix).

such narratives that ‘interviewees identified the news media as both the source of their fears and the reason why they believed those fears were valid.’<sup>189</sup>

Such findings seemingly corroborate Gray’s assertion that ‘news of disaster is the only narrative people need.’ In explaining the reduced significance of the fictional narrative to Brita, Gray reasons that contemporary society is ‘giving way to terror, to news of terror, to tape recorders and cameras, to radios, to bombs stashed in radios. [...] News is the last addiction’ (p.42). Certainly, within the novel the dissemination of knowledge through the narrative of disaster seemingly engenders a pervasive anxiety that negotiates and contests identity. Explaining the breadth of her photographic project to Gray, Brita notes how her having to frequently travel means that ‘there is no moment on certain days when [she’s] not thinking terror.’ She asserts:

They have us in their power. In boarding areas I never sit near windows in case of flying glass. I carry a Swedish passport so that’s ok unless you believe that terrorists killed the prime minister. Then maybe it’s not so good. And I use codes in my address book for names and addresses of writers because how can you tell if the name of a certain writer is dangerous to carry, some dissident, some Jew or blasphemous. I’m careful about reading matter. Nothing religious comes with me, no books with religious symbols on the jacket and no pictures of guns or sexy women (pp. 40-41).

Brita’s anxieties clearly reflect the heightened tensions between East and West following Khomeini’s issuing of a *fatwa* against Rushdie in 1989 for his blasphemous rendering of Islam within *The Satanic Verses* (to be explored further in chapter four). The extent to which the media are complicit to such tensions is reflected in the novel by Karen’s distraught disbelief at watching the televised images of Khomeini’s funeral (pp.188-193). As she watches the amassing crowd express its collective sorrow, she reflects: ‘if other people watched, if millions watched, if these millions matched the number on the Iranian plain, doesn’t it mean we share something with the mourners, know an anguish, feel something pass between us, hear the sigh of some collective grief’ (p.191). The sense of collective mourning is crucial, for as Self comes to realise in *Money*, the only way to negotiate the

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid, p.xxix

meaninglessness that defines contemporary society is to regain a sense of shared humanity.

*Prophecy IV: 'The Future Belongs to Crowds'*

The above hypothesis, expressed in the last sentence of the novel's prologue, although seemingly at odds with the Beirut terrorist's imagining of the future, possesses a sentiment that resonates throughout the narrative. Seemingly reflective of the postmodern tradition, it is perhaps unsurprising that within *Mao II* the notion of a coherent individual identity is displaced by a politics of representation which emphasises a collective social subjectivity that functions to eradicate difference and plurality, and instead foster homogeneity. Indeed, the recurring motif of the crowd succinctly reflects the nature of contemporary identity, where individuals are ostensibly 'immunized against the language of self' (p.8). The most salient rendering of the dehumanising nature of the crowd is to be found in the novel's prologue, which details Karen's part within a Moonie mass wedding held at the Yankee Stadium. As her parents, watching the nuptials from the grandstand, struggle to find Karen within the 'undifferentiated mass' (p.3), they become increasingly anxious as their daughter slips away into anonymity: her father 'keeps the glasses trained, feeling a slight desperation now, a need to find her and remind himself who she is. Healthy, intelligent, twenty-one, serious-sided, possessed of a selfness, a teeming soul, nuance and shadow, grids of pinpoint singularities they will never drill out of her' (p.7). In his review of the novel, Amis suggests that Karen 'is only the most extreme symptom of an (apparently) general condition.' Attributing the lure of the cult as a response to the problematic politics of identity that defines postmodern existence, he contends, 'the post-modern world magnifies the self to the point of insupportability; those who can't take it will need to surrender to an idea or – easier still – a personality.'<sup>190</sup> Indeed, for Karen, surrendering herself to the Unification Church is not akin to her sacrificing her individual identity; rather in ascribing to the ideology of Sun Myung Moon, she is reinvigorated with the security of belonging. As she waits to have her marriage blessed, 'she feels intact, rayed with well-being,' and as the individual

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<sup>190</sup> Martin Amis, 'Thoroughly Post-Modern Millennium'  
<[http://www.martinamisweb.com/pre\\_2006/mao2a.htm](http://www.martinamisweb.com/pre_2006/mao2a.htm)> (accessed 29.01.10) [originally published in *Independent*, September 8, 1991]

brides and grooms begin to forget their past identities, 'leaving behind all the small banes and body woes', they chant and are immediately 'fortified by the blood of numbers' (p.8).

The crowd features prominently throughout the narrative; evoked primarily through DeLillo's rendering of the Hillsborough Disaster (pp.32-34), the massacre in Tiananmen Square (pp.176-178), and the funeral of Khomeini. That all three events are introduced to the novel as Karen watches them on a television screen is significant, and seemingly attests to the ubiquity of the disaster narrative. Indeed, it is arguably the exposure to such images that causes Karen to once again seek solace in the crowd.

Despite her relationship with Scott, it is ultimately Gray who defines Karen; she effectively substitutes the Master's authority for the author's. When he leaves their secluded existence, then, the micro-community that had sheltered her from the meaninglessness of wider society is instantly shattered and her identity is thrown into turmoil: 'Karen's life had no center with Bill on the lam. She was all drift and spin' (p.142). Arriving in New York to try and track Gray down, Karen is immediately drawn to the homeless spectres who, ignored within the main city space, create their own community – 'a tent city' – within the park (p.149). As she listens to them converse, the 'constant rolling drone, statements and set responses' remind her of the prayers and chants that had defined her identity as a member of the Unification Church, and as she stands amongst them, the potential of the crowd to imbue the disorientated individual with a sense of purpose and belonging becomes evident, as shocked, she 'realized they *saw* her' (p.151).

Scanlan argues that although the novel criticizes mass movements bitterly, it conveys 'the intensity of that desire, as it is experienced by the believer, sympathetically.'<sup>191</sup> Certainly, returning to Scott, Karen ultimately rejects the ideology of the crowd, yet her desire to belong might be perceived as a rational response to the state of 'nonbeing' precipitated by postmodern society. Indeed, as Scott explains to Brita: 'the point of mass marriage is to show that we have to survive as a community instead of individuals trying to master every complex force' (p.89). It is precisely this notion of community consciousness, or rather species consciousness, that seemingly takes on an increased potency within the post-9/11

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<sup>191</sup> Margaret Scanlan, *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction*, p.26

period. In a depthless, meaningless postmodern society, perhaps the future belongs not to terrorists, but rather ‘to crowds’ (p.16).

## 2.4 The Function of Literature After 9/11

Prefaced to the 1995 edition of his novel *Crash* (1973), Ballard speculates on the status of contemporary literature and the increasingly problematic role of the author. Set against the backdrop of an ‘ambiguous world’, he contends that ‘the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decades,’ to the extent that ‘it is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel’, for ‘the fiction is already there.’<sup>192</sup> Indeed, he suggests that whereas once there was evidently a clear demarcation between the external world of ‘reality’ and the inner world of ‘fantasy and the imagination’, within the contemporary moment, the distinction becomes blurred as the concepts become increasingly conflated.<sup>193</sup> Ballard reflects upon the manner in which such an ontological shift might manifest itself within the formal and stylistic concerns of the novel:

Given these transformations, what is the main task facing the writer? Can he, any longer, make use of the techniques and perspectives of the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, with its linear narrative, its measured chronology, its consular characters grandly inhabiting their domains within an ample time and space?<sup>194</sup>

As a reflection of the cultural and philosophical mood at the time of the novel’s original publication, the piece is undeniably germane, in that it succinctly outlines the anxieties inherent to postmodern notions of authorship and literary tradition. Moreover, Ballard’s concluding statement that ‘the ultimate role of *Crash* is

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<sup>192</sup> J.G. Ballard, ‘Introduction’ to *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995), p.4

<sup>193</sup> Conceived primarily as a post hoc introduction to *Crash*, the piece nonetheless offers a critical assessment of the contemporary structure of feeling. That such a profoundly postmodern intervention into the state of the novel should be written in 1995 is intriguing, and clearly Ballard’s concerns regarding the need to reassess the significance of realist techniques to contemporary fiction reflect similar anxieties expressed in earlier postmodernist, and indeed modernist, polemics.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, p.5

cautionary, a warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape,<sup>195</sup> situates the novel as perfectly capturing the zeitgeist of the (early) postmodern moment. As an analysis of the contemporary, or rather mid-1990's, mood, however, the piece is evidently more problematic. The seamlessness with which Ballard switches from reflecting on the climate at the time of the novel's initial publication to assessing the nuances of the contemporary moment, implies that the cultural mood of the early 1970s continues unabated into the landscape of the mid-1990s, and that the cultural forms produced within the two periods are instantly comparable. Clearly such a notion needs to be questioned. While, as Nick Bentley observes, 'in many ways the 1990s represent a continuation of central themes and concerns of the post-war novel,'<sup>196</sup> a comparison of the fictions published in the late 1960s and early 1970s with those novels published in the mid- to late 1990s demonstrates a clear shift in style and approach that is evaporated by Ballard's diagnosis. Novels such as *Crash*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and *The Unfortunates* are largely representative of a specific genre of literature (to which we might want to add the novels of Angela Carter) that overtly deconstructs nineteenth-century techniques, and to which Ballard's questioning of the relevance of realist traditions seems entirely pertinent. Later fictions of the 1990s such as Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* (1994), Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* (1995) and Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997), however, are arguably indicative of a significant progression from such attitudes, and while they draw upon the techniques and concerns of their immediate literary predecessors, their being conceived within a broadly realist tradition marks them as distinct from the fictions published twenty years previously.

While the formal concerns raised by the piece are contentious, however, Ballard's hypothesis outlining the problematic status of the contemporary writer anticipates the concerns regarding authorship that would come to the fore following the events of 9/11. Reflecting on the fundamental incomprehensibility of the contemporary landscape, he speculates whether the author possesses the 'moral authority to invent a self-sufficient and self-enclosed world, to preside over his characters like an examiner, knowing all the questions in advance?' Such scepticism

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid, p.6

<sup>196</sup> Nick Bentley, 'Introduction: Mapping the Millennium. Themes and Trends in Contemporary British Fiction' in *British Fiction of the 1990s* ed. Nick Bentley (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), p.2

towards the author's omnipotent governance of a text is plainly redolent of earlier polemics, yet his subsequent positioning of the author seemingly predates the crisis in authorship that would accompany the assumed crisis in representation engendered by 9/11. He proposes:

I feel myself that the writer's role, his authority and licence to act, have changed radically. I feel that, in a sense, the writer knows nothing any longer. He has no moral stance. He offers the reader the contents of his own head, a set of options and imaginative alternatives. His role is that of the scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory, faced with unknown terrain or subject. All he can do is to devise various hypotheses and test them against the facts.<sup>197</sup>

That such literary 'experiments' should be tested against 'the facts,' suggests that distinctions between 'fiction' and 'reality' are perhaps not as nebulous as Ballard would contend; yet his precarious positioning of the author as a figure who, due to an implosion of reality, is unable to comment authoritatively on the emergent landscape, seems entirely relevant, in that it anticipates the presumed social redundancy of the novelist within the post-9/11 climate. Certainly, as noted above, the events of 9/11 brought about a sudden excess of reality that functioned to further destabilise the capricious relationship between fiction and reality. Just as Ballard suggests that the last decades of the twentieth century are characterised by a shift in their relationship, so in assessing the sudden implosion of reality generated by the events and images of 9/11, Baudrillard considers the extent to which reality might 'outstrip fiction':

If it seems to do so, this is because it has absorbed fiction's energy, and has itself become fiction. We might almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the novel is jealous of the image ... It is a kind of duel between them, a contest to see which can be the most unimaginable.<sup>198</sup>

In looking back on the events of 9/11, it is perhaps above all else the broadcasted images that remain most striking and simultaneously most unsettling, precisely because they destabilise established notions of reality and the imagined. Transmitted to a global audience, fiction was seen to be suddenly masquerading as reality, and thus

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<sup>197</sup> J.G. Ballard, 'Introduction' to *Crash*, pp.5-6

<sup>198</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Spirit of Terrorism', p.28

watching the televised images of 9/11, the viewer was unable to assimilate what they were seeing with their own perceptions of the 'real'. Mike Davis recalls how on watching the South Tower of the World Trade Center implode, a friend's child, bewildered by the image, called out, 'but this isn't real the way that real things are real.'<sup>199</sup> It is precisely this displacement of reality that defines the immediate post-9/11 moment.<sup>200</sup> In assessing the apparent excess of reality brought about by the event, DeLillo suggests that 'when we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions.'<sup>201</sup> As encapsulated by the astuteness of the young child's observation, such would appear to be the case with the images of 9/11; effectively mediated by a widespread cultural desensitisation to the spectacle, the images, though profoundly bound to an objective reality, defy comprehension. Bombarded by similar scenes of devastation depicted in Hollywood blockbusters or big-budget TV series, it evidently becomes difficult to separate fiction from reality, which is precisely why the images of 9/11 were, and indeed remain, so uncanny.<sup>202</sup>

With such an apparent ontological shift, Ballard's imagining of the novelist as a figure who, no longer able to authoritatively decipher the ruptured landscape can

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<sup>199</sup> Mike Davis, 'The Flames of New York' in *New Left Review* 12, *Second Series* (November-December 2001), p.38

<sup>200</sup> Amis is not alone when he defines the moment of the attack on the Twin Towers as 'the apotheosis of the postmodern era – the era of images and perceptions' ('The Second Plane' in *The Second Plane. September 11: 2001-2007*, p.5 [Originally published as 'Fear and Loathing' in *Guardian*, September 18, 2001]). Indeed, the image of the second plane striking the South Tower; the bright orange flame against the majestic blue sky; the uncanny images of bodies desperately clasping on to one another as they plummet downwards; the clouds of thick grey dust that consume Manhattan as the towers fall; such images seemingly mark the manifestation of Lyotard's postmodern proclamation: on September 11, 2001 a global audience was 'witness to the unrepresentable' ('Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism' in *The Postmodern Condition*, p.82).

<sup>201</sup> Don DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future'

<sup>202</sup> Many commentators, in assessing the incomprehensibility of the images of 9/11 have drawn parallels with the orchestrated scenes from Hollywood: McEwan describes the 9/11 attacks as 'the kind of events that Hollywood has been imagining these past decades in the worst of its movies' ('Beyond Belief'); writing a week after the events, Amis comments that 'it is already trite – but stringently necessary – to emphasise that such a *mise en scène* would have embarrassed a studio executive's storyboard' ('Fear and Loathing'); Hal Foster, reflecting on the iconography of the events, predicts that 'for the moment we have a reprieve from disaster movies: they are "live"' ('11 September', Tariq Ali *et al*); and Anthony Lane, in an intriguing article that aligns the jingoistic rhetoric of the Bush Administration with a series of scripted pronouncements from various Hollywood movies, suggests that 'what happened on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup> was that the imaginations that had been schooled in the comedy of apocalypse were forced to reconsider the same evidence as tragic' ('This is Not a Movie' in *New Yorker* September 24, 2001), and moreover, we might add that the imaginations schooled by fiction were forced to reconsider the same evidence as real. Perhaps the most bizarre, and damning, manifestation of the shifting dichotomy between fiction and reality, however, is the unsettling fact that following 9/11, the Bush Administration turned to Hollywood executives for advice on predicting potential future terrorist attacks.



only ‘devise various hypotheses,’ seems entirely appropriate to the post-9/11 climate; indeed, Lodge’s 1992 conception of the author ‘still at the crossroads’ similarly anticipates the sense of uncertainty that many novelists contemplating writing after 9/11 would experience. In an interview conducted in 2005, Ian McEwan recalls his problematic relationship with fiction during the year following September 11:

I began to think, well, we’re living in horribly interesting times. There are great, grinding sounds of shifting axes of power and interest and alignment and politics and alliances and differences between nations. [...] During that year [...] I did have a period where I didn’t want to read anything invented. I had a Gradgrindian sense that I didn’t want these airy-fairy, wispy inventions. It was a passing mood. The times were too interesting for the novel, that was the sense.<sup>203</sup>

This sense of the novel as a redundant form, unable to reflect and explain the nuances of the contemporary social landscape, is a concern voiced by many authors in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, and is certainly a notion that has contributed strongly to the myth of 9/11. As McEwan outlines, there is a profound awareness that the contemporary novel, at least in its pre-9/11 incarnation, is inadequate to reflect the realities of the emergent climate. The apparent displacement of fiction as a significant social narrative, is further proposed by Amis who, in positioning the novel as ‘a work of the imagination’, emphasises its sudden superfluity, arguing that ‘the imagination, that day, was of course fully commandeered.’ Commenting on the great number of novelists who were called to write journalistic accounts recounting their reactions to 9/11, he goes on to argue: ‘When the novelist went into newsprint about September 11, there was a murmur to the effect that they were now being obliged to snap out of their solipsistic daydreams: to attend, as best they could, to the facts of life. For politics – once defined as “what’s going on” – suddenly filled the sky.’<sup>204</sup>

The sudden excess of reality that accompanied 9/11 would certainly seem to justify claims attesting to the diminished significance of the novel within the current climate. Reflecting Bill Gray’s prognosis that ‘news of disaster is the only narrative

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<sup>203</sup> Ian McEwan in ‘The Salon Interview: Ian McEwan’, Laura Miller (September 4, 2005) <<http://dir.salon.com/story/books/int/2005/04/09/mcewan/index.html>> (accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>204</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The Voice of the Lonely Crowd’

people need,' there is a sense that, as a means to comprehend the complexities of the new environment, people invariably turn away from fiction, instead seeking explanation from more 'factual' narratives. McEwan's emphasis that such a belief constitutes only a 'passing mood', however, is key, for it suggests that the alleged crisis in representation engendered by 9/11 was only momentary, or rather only envisaged; indeed that novels have continued to be published and consumed with a continued voracity in the years following 9/11, testifies to the unrelenting significance of the form. Furthermore, that so many novelists were called upon to express and share their initial reactions to the events, accentuates the extent to which the author is apotheosized within contemporary society; and while initially many were writing journalistic articles rather than literary pieces, the proliferation of accounts penned by such figures as McEwan, Amis, Drabble, Rushdie, Winterson, DeLillo, Auster and many others, emphasises the sense of expectation and continued responsibility that society places upon its authors to make comprehensible that which remains largely beyond understanding.

Rather than marking the social redundancy of the novel and its creators, it might instead be argued that following 9/11, the sense of expectation placed upon authors intensified, and indeed that the romanticised perception of the author, as a seraphic individual with an intuitive vision of the complexities of human existence, gained an increased resonance. In an article published twelve days after the terrorist attacks, Robert McCrum reflects upon the paradox that 'swamped as we've been with a tidal wave of quite unbearable reality, it's the writers of fiction, contemporary masters such as Ian McEwan in Britain and Paul Auster in the US, who have come up with the words of comfort and clarity we crave in the midst of shock and desolation.' Despite the apparent displacement of fiction by reality proposed by authors such as McEwan and Amis, and formerly Ballard and DeLillo, McCrum emphasises the continued significance of the novelist within the post-9/11 climate, suggesting that 'people sometimes dismiss fiction as mere entertainment, but at times like this there's no question that novelists at their best have a privileged access to truths about the human condition denied to others.'<sup>205</sup> Such a pseudo-Kantian elevation of the artist, while contentious, is further corroborated by McEwan who in April 2002 argues:

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<sup>205</sup> Robert McCrum, 'The Need for Novelists' in *Observer* (September 23, 2001)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/23/september11.society>> (accessed 06.07.07)

[I]n our nature, we are capable of acts of extraordinary love and kindness, inventiveness and mutual aid. On the other side, we are capable of acts of extraordinary destruction. I think it's inherent. I think one of the great tasks of art is to explore that. [...] I personally think the novel, above all forms in literature, is able to investigate human nature and try and understand those two sides, all those many, many sides of human nature.<sup>206</sup>

Such high expectations regarding the social function of literature are perhaps surprising given McEwan's later reflections on his relationship to fiction during the year following 9/11, however his perception of the novel as a form that enables the examination of the human condition is perhaps reflective of a heightened introspection evident within the fictions emerging within the post-9/11 moment.

Assessing the contemporary mood of Western literature, James Wood draws upon the musings of Zadie Smith, and comments that she is merely of her time when she remarks that it is not the writer's task 'to tell us how somebody felt about something, it's to tell us how the world works.'<sup>207</sup> In exploring the assumed alteration in cultural mood engendered by 9/11, Wood suggests that one of its literary casualties might well be this particular mindset. He suggests that within the pre-9/11 moment, two genres dominated the literary mood: 'social realism' and 'hysterical realism'. For Wood, the former genre consists of 'novels of immense self-consciousness with no selves in them at all, curiously arrested and very "brilliant" books that know a thousand things but do not know a single human being.' To this category, Wood attributes the 'DeLilloan idea of the novelist as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer – a cultural theorist, fighting the culture with dialectical devilry.' The novels of the second genre, 'characterised by a fear of silence,' for Wood resemble 'a perpetual motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity.' Attributing the recent novels of DeLillo, Rushdie and Zadie Smith to the category, such texts are distinctive by their relentless superfluity, where 'stories and sub-stories sprout on every page.'<sup>208</sup> From Wood's descriptions, it immediately becomes apparent that both genres are profoundly indebted to the (new) postmodern tradition, and thus his suggestion that both styles become redundant within the contemporary moment

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<sup>206</sup> Ian McEwan in 'Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero. Interview: Ian McEwan', Helen Whitney in *Frontline* (September 3, 2002)

<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/interviews/mcewan.html>> (accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>207</sup> Zadie Smith, cited in James Wood's 'Tell Me How Does It Feel?'

<sup>208</sup> James Wood, 'Tell Me How Does It Feel?'

seemingly fortifies the myth of 9/11 as epochal marker. Indeed, there is, within the article, a residual sense of Woolf's 'Character in Fiction,' as he deems the depersonalised genres of social and hysterical realism inappropriate to convey the complexities of the emergent post-9/11 mood; the article effectively outlines how serious a matter it is when the genres of one generation are useless for next. For Wood, with the diminished significance of the genres, a space is opened up for the emergence of 'the aesthetic, for the contemplative, for novels that tell us [...] "how somebody felt about something" – indeed, how a lot of different people felt about a lot of different things (these are commonly called novels about human beings).'<sup>209</sup> Such a shift in focus is clearly reflected in McEwan's contemplation of the function of literature as detailed above, and indeed the proposed mood of introspection that, for Wood, is engendered by cultural responses to 9/11, is manifested in his novel *Saturday* (2005).

Reflecting on the genesis of *Saturday*, McEwan comments that he had 'a vague desire, an old wish [...] to write a novel not only about the present but very much in the present.' He goes on to remark that concurrent with the re-emergence of such a residual desire, *Atonement* was published and 9/11 happened. Responding to both events, he remarks, 'I did think that inevitably if I decided to write about the present, whatever changes the world was going through would percolate into the novel. [...] I abandoned myself to the idea that history would be supplying whatever was going on in the novel.'<sup>210</sup> His apparent submission to the influence of history clearly reflects the shift in emphasis from narratives of fiction to those of reality, as prophesied by DeLillo and Ballard, and later observed by Baudrillard. As Mishra contends, however, the form of the novel ultimately prevents McEwan from explicitly addressing the large political, socio-cultural and theological questions that are ubiquitous within the uncertain landscape of the post-9/11 period. Rather, the novel, in a similar manner to Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, follows its central protagonist for twenty-four hours and engages with the complexities of the emergent post-9/11 mood through the characters' responses to it. This is clearly a novel that, rather than offering a 'capacious moral vision' of post-9/11 culture, instead, through its introspective approach, examines 'how somebody felt about something.'<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid

<sup>210</sup> Ian McEwan in 'The Salon Interview: Ian McEwan'

<sup>211</sup> James Wood, 'Tell Me How Does It Feel?'

The novel, written within a broadly realist tradition with a soupçon of modernist technique, follows Henry Perowne, a successful neurosurgeon, on the day of 15<sup>th</sup> February 2003. As predicted, McEwan situates the novel firmly within the historical moment – on this day a series of coordinated rallies took place across the globe, protesting against the impending invasion of Iraq – yet, as one might expect from a text that refuses to ‘tell us how the world works,’ the narrative does not so much explicitly engage with the political or social implications of the anti-war rally, as it positions the event as a visual stimulus, provoking the characters to reflect upon their individual responses to the concerns of the post-9/11 landscape.<sup>212</sup>

Kristiaan Versluys notes how ‘Perowne’s name contains a reference to possession and identity,’ and suggests that the novel itself questions ‘what, in the aftermath of September 11, one owns, how tight one’s grip on life is, and how quickly one can lose it.’<sup>213</sup> Set against the background of a society left ‘baffled and fearful’ by the implications of 9/11 and the amassing tensions as the proposed War on Terror gathers momentum (p.4), there are clear allegorical readings that the text seems to readily provoke.<sup>214</sup> Awakening ‘some hours before dawn,’ Perowne, standing at the window of his Fitzrovia house, looks beyond the ‘triumph of congruent proportion’ that constitutes the eighteenth-century square outside, and situates his gaze on the Post Office Tower, ‘municipal and seedy by day, but at night, half-concealed and decently illuminated, a valiant memorial to more optimistic days’ (pp.3-5). The sense in which the tower governs the skyline is clearly redolent of the imposing nature of the World Trade Center and the mood of triumphant capitalist optimism that it once represented. The parallel between the image forming in front of Perowne and the spectacle of 9/11 becomes increasingly apparent, as turning away from the window, Perowne’s peripheral vision detects ‘some new element outside [...] bright but colourless.’

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<sup>212</sup> Pausing en route to his weekly squash game, Perowne glances at the amassing crowd of protesters, and in reflecting on the extent to which 9/11 might have precipitated a change in the global mood, considers that ‘it is in fact the state of the world that troubles him most, and the marchers are there to remind him of it’ (Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005) p.80).

<sup>213</sup> Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p.188

<sup>214</sup> Perhaps one of the most obvious allegorical interpretations that the novel offers, which I do not have sufficient space to explore significantly in this study, is the reading that aligns the threat of security as experienced by the Perownes with the broader sense of insecurity that is experienced by the West following 9/11. In such a reading, Baxter is situated as the aggressive alien ‘Other’ whose breaching of the security of the Perownes’ home parallels the manner in which Islamic fundamentalism has deconstructed the myth of security and unassailability that defined the Western experience pre-9/11. For such a reading of the novel, see Dominic Head’s chapter ‘“Accidents of Character and Circumstance”’: *Saturday*’ in *Ian McEwan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

Assuming the errant object to possess ‘proportions on a planetary scale,’ (p.13) the ‘gentle thundering gathering in volume’ (p.14) confirms its identity as an aeroplane with its engines on fire, and not a meteor as previously suspected.

The uncanny familiarity of the spectacle plays with the reader’s expectations and emphasises the extent to which the events and images of 9/11 continue to inform and anticipate widespread anxieties regarding the possible repercussions of the terrorist attacks, and indeed the West’s response to them. As Perowne watches the ill-fated plane descend, his perception of the scene is determined wholly by its likeness to the broadcasted images of 9/11:

It’s already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed. [...] The fiery white core and its coloured tail have grown larger – no passengers sitting in that central section of the plane could survive. That is the other familiar element – the horror of what he can’t see. Catastrophe observed from a safe distance. Watching death on a large scale, but seeing no one die. No blood, no screams, no human figures at all, and into this emptiness, the obliging imagination set free (p.16).<sup>215</sup>

Perowne might succinctly be described as an empiricist, who turns to the objective logic of science to explain life’s anomalies. In an effort to expose the root cause of the ‘sustained, distorting euphoria’ that resulted in his bout of insomnia, for instance, he concludes that ‘perhaps down at the molecular level there’s been a chemical accident while he slept – something like a spilled tray of drinks, prompting dopamine-like receptors to initiate a kindly cascade of intracellular events’ (p.5). Moreover, as he considers the coincidence of his being awake to observe the image of the doomed plane cutting across the London skyline, he reflects that if he ‘were inclined to religious feeling, to supernatural explanations, he could play with the idea that he’s been summoned.’ Rather, for Perowne, that he witnesses the event is ‘an arbitrary

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<sup>215</sup> Interestingly, the parallel between the image of the burning plane over London and the spectacle of 9/11 is further emphasised as Perowne’s response effectively replicates McEwan’s reflections upon the events of September 11 as detailed in his article ‘Beyond Belief’.

matter’, since such religious, or supernatural, reasoning ‘belongs on a spectrum at whose far end, rearing like an abandoned temple, lies psychosis’ (p.17).

It is interesting, then, and wholly significant, that while Perowne ordinarily submits to objective logic to garner knowledge, his imaginings of the fate of the plane have no real basis in empirical reasoning: he surmises that ‘the fire must be on the nearside wing where it joins the fuselage’, but then interprets the flashing of the landing lights as a suspicious ‘pretence of normality’ (p.15). Such reasoning effectively has no basis in fact, for clearly there are a number of more logical explanations to account for the fire. That he instantly equates the damage to the plane with an act of terrorism, attests to the potency of the images and narratives of 9/11, and further suggests the subsequent inception of a pervasive anxiety that overwhelms rational response. Indeed, such is the impact of the terrorist attacks, that events within the contemporary climate are inevitably viewed through the lens of 9/11. As Perowne considers, within such a culture of fear, ‘simple train crashes are no longer all that are envisaged, and words like “catastrophe” and “mass fatalities”, “chemical and biological warfare” and “major attack” have recently become bland through repetition’ (pp.11-12). The ubiquity of such phrases within the post-9/11 climate and the extent to which they provoke a pervasive sense of anxiety, or rather fearful expectation, seemingly emphasises the extent to which contemporary knowledge and consciousness is informed through recourse to the narratives of disaster. While the novel encourages many useful allegorical readings that seemingly reflect the intricacies of the post-9/11 mood, it is through the narrative’s examination of the significance of literature to a culture where knowledge is constructed and disseminated primarily through narratives of disaster, that the text engages most intriguingly with the concerns of the contemporary moment.

Prefacing her 2005 interview with McEwan with a précis of *Saturday*, Laura Miller argues that the novel ‘is about as different from his 2001 bestseller, *Atonement*, as you could imagine. Instead of a twisty, self-devouring meditation on lies, guilt and literature, *Saturday* is a smooth, seamless creation depicting one day in the life of Henry Perowne, neurosurgeon, Londoner and happy man.’<sup>216</sup> Although formally and stylistically the novels appear incongruous, the extent to which *Saturday* might be interpreted as being conceived within a different *oeuvre* to *Atonement* needs to be

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<sup>216</sup> Laura Miller, ‘The Salon Interview: Ian McEwan’

questioned; and while the timeframe of both novels demonstrates an obvious contrast, as do their divergent historical settings, the description of *Saturday* as a ‘smooth, seamless creation’ seems overly simplistic, reducing the complexities and contradictions of the narrative to an uncomplicated formula. Moreover, it would seem that there is evident within the novels a continuation of theme that such a formulation ostensibly negates.

McEwan’s use of Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* to preface *Atonement* establishes the central concerns of the text: namely, the degree to which literature influences and negotiates an individual’s perception of reality, and further the ethical implications of the author’s imagined ‘realities’. Within the opening section of the novel, Briony Tallis attributes the satisfaction she experiences in writing fiction to the sense that within the text, miniaturised worlds can quickly be created, and thus, within her imagined renderings, ‘her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so.’<sup>217</sup> It is this problematic notion of omnipotent authority, or rather as Ballard would contend, the sense of whether authors possess the ‘moral authority to invent a self-sufficient and self-enclosed world,’ that is questioned throughout the novel, and indeed which continues to be a key consideration of *Saturday*, which, in seemingly responding to the concerns anticipated by *Mao II*, assesses the extent to which literature can remain socially relevant in a period where ‘the world narrative belongs to terrorists.’

Having witnessed the ominous descent of the burning plane, Perowne, ‘feeling unhinged and unreasonable and still in need of talking,’ yet reluctant to wake his sleeping wife, leaves the bedroom for the sheltered security of the ‘cavernous basement kitchen’ and the reassuring objective reportage that the radio news can provide (p.25). Meeting his son in the kitchen, Perowne fulfils his need to talk by sharing news of the incident with him, and with both effectively interpreting the event through the lens of 9/11, the disaster narrative is sought for definitive confirmation of fate of the condemned craft:

Henry is going towards the hi-fi, intending to retune it, but Theo picks up the remote from the kitchen table and turns on the small TV they keep near the stove for moments like this, breaking stories. They wait for the grandiose preamble to the four o’clock news to finish – pulsing synthetic music,

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<sup>217</sup> Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.7



spiralling, radiating computer graphics, combined in a *son et lumière* of Wagnerian scale to suggest urgency, technology, global coverage. [...] Straight away it's obvious that the burning plane has yet to enter the planetary matrix. It remains an unreliable subjective event (p.29).

Interestingly, the image of father and son sitting in front of the television screen expectantly waiting for the unfathomable spectacle to be made comprehensible, parallels McEwan's own witnessing of the events of 9/11.<sup>218</sup> In drawing upon his own reaction to 9/11, and in incorporating other autobiographical threads into the narrative,<sup>219</sup> *Saturday* seemingly realises the anticipated subversion of reality and fiction as previously outlined by Ballard. Indeed, fulfilling Ballard's prophecy that 'the writer's task is to invent the reality,'<sup>220</sup> McEwan notes: 'I decided that if [the novel] was going to be of the times and in the present, I'd not invent everything. But, of course, in describing it you shave it away and invent and change reality to suit the rest of the novel anyway.'<sup>221</sup> Significantly, it might be argued that such an acknowledgement seemingly situates the novel within a continuing tradition of (new) postmodern historiographic metafiction, and further positions McEwan, as Lodge would contend, as still standing at the crossroads. I suggested in the previous chapter, through a consideration of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, that 'the work of historiographic metafiction exposes the tensions between historicity and fictionality,' and it can certainly be argued that *Saturday*, in seamlessly incorporating 'real' events with fictional imaginings, and moreover in fictionalising 'reality' – or rather, in altering history to suit the novel – does precisely this. Certainly, the novel, being situated in a specific historical moment, is profoundly of its time, yet the tensions that it explores, both explicitly and implicitly, force a reassessment of precisely how the present is 'known', and emphasise the inexorable fictionality of history.

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<sup>218</sup> In an article published the day after the terrorist attacks, McEwan recalls: 'Our [television] set in the corner is mostly unwatched. Now my son and I surfed – hungrily, ghoulishly between CNN, CBC, and BBC24. As soon as an expert was called in to pronounce on the politics or the symbolism, we moved on. We only wanted to know what was happening' ('Beyond Belief').

<sup>219</sup> In reflecting upon the genesis of *Saturday*, McEwan comments that while 'most of the novel is fiction,' in the process of writing he 'decided to use whatever was to hand.' Certainly, McEwan's expressed concerns regarding the social significance of fiction within the post-9/11 climate are projected and interrogated through Perowne's problematic relationship with literature. He further confirms that the 'house and circumstances' within the novel are his own, and that the characters of Theo and Lily are broadly based upon his son and dying mother (Ian McEwan in 'The Salon Interview: Ian McEwan').

<sup>220</sup> Introduction' to *Crash*, p.4

<sup>221</sup> Ian McEwan in 'The Salon Interview: Ian McEwan'

Seemingly substantiating Bill Gray's prognosis relating to the dissemination of knowledge within contemporary society, the authority of the disaster narrative, for Perowne and Theo, and indeed McEwan, lies in its potential to transform the unreliability of subjective experience into a coherent objective reality that can be cognitively processed. Reflecting later in the day on the altered landscape precipitated by 9/11, Perowne surmises that 'the possibility of their recurrence is one thread that binds the days,' and certainly within a period characterised by such a pervasive anxiety, the lure of the disaster narrative as a means to make comprehensible such acts of meaningless violence, intensifies. While the potential terrorist atrocity of the early hours is confirmed as a decidedly less sinister incident involving a faulty engine on a Russian cargo plane, the events of 9/11 continue to filter Perowne's response to it, and so as he prepares for the evening's dinner party, stepping towards the CD player, he recoils, feeling instead the stronger 'pull, like gravity, of the approaching TV news' (p.176). His empirical sense of reasoning is established early in the narrative and reinforced throughout, yet such is the fundamental incomprehensibility of the terrorist attacks that, following 9/11, 'hints of the apocalyptic shape his existence.'<sup>222</sup> Perowne's relentless compulsion to seek explanation from the disaster narrative is, as he acknowledges, redolent of the more widespread irrationality evoked by the terrorist attacks:

It's a condition of the times, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and be joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety. [...] Just as the hospitals have their crisis plans, so the television networks stand ready to deliver, and their audiences wait. Bigger, grosser next time. Please don't let it happen. But let me see it all the same, as it's happening and from every angle, and let me be among the first to know (p.176).

The macabre desire to 'be among the first to know,' the first to voyeuristically witness the tragedy, is clearly problematic. As Dominic Head argues, 'the global media village connects the terrorist and the average viewer, producing a shared appetite for catastrophe. A generalized shame must flow from this, making a moral vantage point

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<sup>222</sup> Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, p.189

hard to establish.<sup>223</sup> Furthermore, the yearning to witness the event is not so much a desire to observe the tragedy ‘live’, but rather a need to consume it through the narrative of disaster; or rather, to witness the tragedy as an objective reality, rather than as an unreliable subjective event.

Perowne’s problematic relationship with literature (explored below) and his relentless compulsion to seek explanation within the disaster narrative seems to insist upon the social redundancy of fictional narratives within the contemporary moment, as prophesied by DeLillo. Unlike *Mao II*, which emphasises the displacement of fiction by the disaster narrative, within *Saturday*, the nature of the dichotomy is shown to be more ambiguous, as the accounts of Perowne and Theo’s responses to 9/11 saliently demonstrate. For Perowne, the magnitude of the event induces a shift in the cultural consciousness, from relative innocence to a pervasive anxiety, which ensures that the contemporary moment is perceived, and thus negotiated, through the lens of 9/11:

Despite the troops mustering in the Gulf, or the tanks out at Heathrow on Thursday, the storming of the Finsbury Park mosque, the reports of terror cells around the country, and Bin Laden’s promise on tape of ‘martyrdom attacks’ on London, Perowne held for a while to the idea that it was all an aberration, that the world would surely calm down and soon be otherwise [...] But lately, this is looking optimistic. Against his own inclination, he’s adapting, the way patients eventually do to their sudden loss or sight or use of their limbs. No going back. The nineties are looking like an innocent decade, and who would have thought that at the time? Now we breathe a different air (p.32).

His preoccupation with the event and its potential repercussions would seem to imply the unrelenting dominance of the disaster narrative. For Perowne, 9/11 and its aftermath signal an indisputable shift in the global mood from which there is essentially ‘no going back,’ and as the individual must force himself to adapt, so he increasingly seeks recourse to the disaster narrative as a means to negotiate the newly problematic climate.

In contrast, for Theo, 9/11 ‘can’t trouble him the way it does his father, who reads the same papers with morbid fixation.’ Rather:

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<sup>223</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p.123

His initiation, in front of the TV, before the dissolving towers, was intense but he adapted quickly. These days he scans the papers for fresh developments the way he might a listings magazine. As long as there's nothing new, his mind is free. International terror, security cordons, preparations for war – these represent the steady state, the weather (p.32).

What is interesting about Theo's response to 9/11 and its potential repercussions, is the manner in which the ensuing anxieties surrounding the event have been more thoroughly processed and banalized. The evident manifestations of an altered global climate, which for Perowne function to intensify his anxieties and exacerbate the compulsion to seek explanation from the disaster narrative, are for his son merely mundane symptoms of the contemporary landscape. For Theo the influence of the disaster narrative is only ever fleeting; with no 'fresh developments,' his mind remains unaffected by the possible implications of the event, and his perception of the present is untainted by the past. Moreover, the clear parallels between the McEwans' and the Perownes' 9/11 experience further suggest that the authority of the disaster narrative is only ephemeral; indeed, that Perowne and Theo's reaction to the spectacle of the burning plane is essentially a fictional rendering of McEwan and his son's response to the events of September 11, suggests that the continued significance of the disaster narrative is dependent upon its fictional manifestation. Rather than the two narratives existing in a continual tension, in the manner proposed by Bill Gray, we might contend that the nature of the relationship is decidedly more symbiotic. As is implicit to *Saturday's* fictional engagement with an historically verifiable moment, while the objective reportage offered by the disaster narrative functions as a means to situate a given event within a comprehensible reality – or rather to authenticate it as 'real' – its rendering within the literary form allows for the event to be subjectively contemplated. Certainly, *Saturday's* engagement with the post-9/11 mood functions not to inform the reader 'how the world works,' but rather to both convey 'how somebody felt about something' and to facilitate further contemplation.

The competing claims regarding the continued relevance of literature within the post-9/11 climate are outlined and interrogated in the narrative through the conflicting attitudes of Perowne and his daughter Daisy, a young poet. Attributing his 'poor taste and insensitivity' to a profound lack of literary education, Daisy devises a series of reading lists to which Perowne has submitted himself to 'for some years'

(p.6). Accepting the agreement primarily as a means to retain contact with his increasingly absent daughter, Perowne, with his Gradgrindian disposition inhibiting the development of aesthetic appreciation, garners little fulfilment from the curriculum. On reading a biography of Darwin, he becomes ‘faintly depressed by the way a whole life could be contained by a few hundred pages – bottled, like homemade chutney’ (p.6). The inducement of mild depression, however, is a resoundingly positive reaction compared to his experience of reading literary fiction. ‘At the cost of slowing his mental processes and many hours of his valuable time,’ Perowne, under Daisy’s tutelage, reads *Anna Karenina* and *Madam Bovary*, but unable to appreciate what she means by ‘literary genius’, he reduces the aesthetic mastery of Tolstoy and Flaubert to their ‘steady, workmanlike’ capacity to depict a recognisable reality: ‘the details were apt and convincing enough, but surely not so very difficult to marshal if you were halfway observant and had the patience to write them all down’ (p.67). It is, however, the fictions of the magic realists that most reassure him of the redundancy of the novel as a socially edifying form. Alluding to Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and McEwan’s *The Child in Time*, McEwan, via Perowne, seemingly questions the relevance of such postmodern engagements with ‘reality,’ suggesting that their recourse to the supernatural demonstrates ‘an insufficient imagination, a dereliction of duty, a childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real, of the demanding re-enactment of the plausible.’ Imploring Daisy to revise her reading lists, Perowne explains his dissatisfaction with the magic realists, attributing their ontological revelry with an insistent nihilism: ‘when anything can happen, nothing much matters’ (pp.67-68). As a means to assess the altered reality of the post-9/11 climate, there is the sense that postmodern forms lack the sincerity and aesthetic verisimilitude required to engage in any meaningful way with the complexities of the emergent landscape.

Reflecting McEwan’s own concerns regarding the significance of literature following 9/11, for Perowne fiction, as a profoundly anti-foundational narrative, lacks the sufficient authority to augment and refine individual, and indeed collective, consciousness. In seeking explanation and moral guidance, one must turn to what is known empirically, ensuring that objective facts are not compromised by subjective meditations. As Perowne concludes, ‘it interests him less to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained. The times are strange enough. Why make things up?’ (p.66). Indeed, despite the efforts of his ‘too literate daughter’ (p.6), Perowne reasons that fiction has little pedagogic value within the contemporary moment:

Daisy's reading lists have persuaded him that fiction is too humanly flawed, too sprawling and hit-and-miss to inspire uncomplicated wonder at the magnificence of human ingenuity, of the impossible dazzlingly achieved. [...] Work that you cannot begin to imagine achieving yourself, that displays a ruthless, nearly inhuman element of self-enclosed perfection – this is his idea of genius. This notion of Daisy's, that people can't 'live' without stories, is simply not true. He is living proof (p.68).

Despite his protestations, however, the residual significance of literature, and the manner in which it both filters and enriches an individual's experience of 'reality', is emphasised later in the novel, when, as a means to convey his affection for the area, Perowne alludes to Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December* and Albert Corde's musing that 'he could live happily ever after on Charlotte Street'<sup>224</sup>; empirical reasoning, it seems, is too objectively flawed to inspire uncomplicated wonder at the sprawling magnificence of human emotion. Indeed, it might be argued that Perowne is 'living proof' of Daisy's testimony, since it is precisely such fictional narratives that both imbue the individual with knowledge regarding the human condition, and moreover provide moral and emotional sustenance enabling subjects to reflect upon their distinctive relationship, and emotive responses, to reality.

In this sense, 'people can't live without stories' precisely because such narratives constitute and refine subjectivity. It is hugely significant that while the disaster narrative is privileged throughout the text, the resolution to the unfolding crisis within the novel is initiated following an appeal to the potential of literature to influence human reasoning. When Baxter commandeers the Perownes' home – 'thus in miniature and symbolically gathering in his persona all the outside forces that 9/11 has unleashed and that threaten domestic peace and stability'<sup>225</sup> – it is Daisy's recital of 'Dover Beach', which she claims as her own, that disrupts his aggressive attack and causes him to reassess his position within the specific moment. As he instructs her to read the poem for a second time, he is struck by the beauty of it and the manner in which it evokes memories of his relationship to the past (p.222). The choice of

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<sup>224</sup> Saul Bellow, *The Dean's December* (London: Penguin, 1998), p.81

<sup>225</sup> Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, p.192

poem is undeniably significant, with the withdrawing ‘Sea of Faith’<sup>226</sup> and ‘ignorant armies clash[ing] by night,’<sup>227</sup> possessing a clear resonance within the contemporary moment. Moreover, that the poem initiates such a profound response in Baxter, emphasises the continued significance of literature as a narrative that provides moral and emotional sustenance to a broadly secular society.

In his ‘Study of Poetry’ (1880), Matthew Arnold expressed his anxieties regarding the decline in religious interest evidenced throughout Britain. He felt that the nature of modern industrial society, with its preoccupation with materialism – interestingly Perowne recognises that Daisy perceives him as a ‘coarse, unredeemable materialist’ (p.134) – had led to the philistinism of the middle classes. In a society where the previously adamant authority of formal religion was increasingly challenged, Arnold proclaimed that moral sustenance could instead be found within poetry. He argued:

We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called into higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us.<sup>228</sup>

It is precisely this capacity of literature – to provoke individual reflection and to interpret the, often incomprehensible, intricacies of reality – that *Saturday* emphasises, both explicitly through Baxter’s placation and implicitly through the form of the novel itself.

Situated firmly within a specific historical moment, *Saturday* nonetheless refuses to convey to the reader ‘how the world works.’ While frequently referred to as a post-9/11 novel, the text is ambiguous in its diagnosis of the contemporary moment<sup>229</sup>, and indeed in its positioning within such an emergent literary corpus.

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<sup>226</sup> Matthew Arnold, ‘Dover Beach’, l.21 in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume 2* Seventh Edn, eds. M.H. Abrams & Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), p.1492 [Originally published in 1867 in his collection *New Poems*]

<sup>227</sup> Ibid, l.37

<sup>228</sup> Matthew Arnold, ‘The Study of Poetry’ in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume 2*, p.1535

<sup>229</sup> Perowne veers from reasoning that ‘the world has not fundamentally changed’ and rationalising that Islamic Terrorism will inevitably ‘settle into place’ amongst the long history of global crises (p.77), to

Rather than presenting evidence to either confirm or deny the cultural shift precipitated by the terrorist attacks, the novel might usefully be conceived as a lens through which the myths of 9/11 can be systematically outlined and explored; clearly, it is the process of *presenting* the various claims that is significant. That *Saturday* denies the reader resolution, results in its interpretation as a novel of introspection. Indeed, such introspection seems to perfectly embody Ballard's imagining of the contemporary author. Lacking the 'moral authority to invent a self-sufficient and self-enclosed world,' McEwan, 'unable to preside over his characters like an examiner' offers no totalising moral or cultural position within *Saturday*, but rather uses the novel to explore many of the concerns attributed to the post-9/11 mood. It is precisely through such an introspective approach that contemporary literature remains relevant and, contrary to the myth, continues to function as a significant social narrative.

## 2.5 Boredom and Arbitrary Acts of Terror

The age of terror, I suspect, will also be remembered as the age of boredom. Not the kind of boredom that afflicts the blasé and the effete, but a superboredom, rounding out and complementing the superterror of suicide-mass murder.<sup>230</sup>

Writing on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, Amis considers the extent to which the event might have initiated an altered global consciousness. Having previously described the image of the second plane striking the South Tower of the World Trade Center as 'the worldflash of a coming future,'<sup>231</sup> in retrospectively assessing the five years since 2001, he concludes that the terrorist attacks of September 11 precipitated an altered age defined by a pervasive boredom. As a means to illustrate the 'trance of inanition' that characterises the contemporary moment, he recalls an instant when, waiting to board a flight from Montevideo to New York in 2005, he wearily watched on for half

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reluctantly concluding that 'the world probably has changed fundamentally and the matter is being clumsily handled, particularly by the Americans' (p.81).

<sup>230</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Age of Horrorism' in *Observer* (September 10, 2006)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/sep/10/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety1>> (accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>231</sup> 'Fear and Loathing' in *Guardian* (September 18, 2001)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/18/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety>> (accessed 06.07.07)



an hour as a security official searched his six-year-old daughter's rucksack for terrorist paraphernalia. 'Palpating the length of all four limbs of her fluffy duck,' he reflects that the terrorists of 9/11, and the plotters of future terrorist atrocities, have 'won a great symbolic victory for boredom,' and while the West will 'eventually prevail in the war against terror [...] we haven't got a chance in the war against boredom.'<sup>232</sup>

Amis's suggestion that recent acts of terrorism engendered the age of 'superboredom' seems contrary to the argument proposed by Haddad in *Mao II*; yet implicit to both the novel's anticipated diagnosis of the contemporary age and Amis's account of the post-9/11 moment, is the perception of the terrorist act as that which imbues both its perpetrators and victims with a coherent subjectivity that is ordinarily stifled within a society 'reduced to blur and glut.' Just as Haddad suggests that the terrorist, in executing such incomprehensible acts, resists incorporation into the vacuity of contemporary culture, so Amis surmises that 'to feel that you are a geohistorical player is a tremendous lure to those condemned, as they see it, to exclusion and anonymity.' Thus, he argues that 'as Muhammad Atta steered the 767 towards its destination, he was confident, at least, that his fellow town-planners in Aleppo would remember his name, along with everybody else on earth.'<sup>233</sup> As with *Mao II*, there is a sense within Amis's reasoning, that the emergent 'age of terror' is in some ways an inevitable response to the vacuity and meaninglessness endemic to postmodern society. In inflicting such an act, the terrorist is suddenly elevated to the status of 'a contributor to planetary events', and is instantly immortalised.<sup>234</sup>

Such a notion is explicated in Lionel Shriver's 2003 novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. An epistolary novel, the narrative is told from the perspective of Eva Khatchadourian as she struggles to come to terms with the murderous act committed by her fifteen-year-old son, Kevin. Similarly to *Saturday*, the novel is situated firmly within the contemporary moment, with Kevin's murderous onslaught – after murdering his father and sister, Kevin, having affected a plan to lure his targets into the high-school gym, kills seven of his fellow students, his English teacher and a cafeteria assistant – clearly evoking parallels with the Columbine Massacre of 1999. The notion that such an act of premeditated, meaningless violence elevates both its victims and perpetrators from the anonymity of everyday existence is seemingly

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<sup>232</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Age of Horrorism'

<sup>233</sup> Ibid

<sup>234</sup> Ibid

corroborated as Eva hears news of the massacre from her work colleagues. As news of the incident circumspectly breaks – Eva recalls how initial reports were ‘exasperatingly brief,’ containing little specific information regarding the nature of the attack – leaving the office to go to the school, she notes the sudden sense of reverence with which she is perceived by, and thus instantly made distinct from, her colleagues: ‘As I left, my staff was already regarding me with the awe that attends those who have even the most tangential association with the cameo news flash on the America On-Line home page.’<sup>235</sup> As her association with the event becomes apparent, the sense of awe by which she was momentarily defined is displaced by notoriety, and as her identity becomes inextricably tied to her son’s role within the massacre, she expresses the desire to regain the relative (social) anonymity of her former subjectivity: recognising that she is ultimately defined as ‘mother of the ignoble Kevin Khatchadourian,’ Eva muses that ‘on the most private level, this filial mugging of who I once was to myself may be what I most resent’ (pp.196-197).

Furthermore there is a clear sense within the novel that Kevin’s act might be interpreted as a response to the banality of contemporary society and the associated ‘zero-identity’ of the postmodern subject. Just as Amis considers the manner in which the ‘nonentity’ can be drastically elevated within contemporary ‘popularity-contest culture, with its VIP ciphers and meteoric mediocrities,’<sup>236</sup> so as the narrative progresses and Eva becomes increasingly temporally disconnected from the event, ‘little by little, led kicking and screaming’ she begins to comprehend ‘the rationality of *Thursday*’:

Mark David Chapman now gets the fan mail that John Lennon can’t; Richard Ramirez, the “Night Stalker,” may have destroyed a dozen women’s chances for connubial happiness but still receives numerous offers of marriage in prison himself. In a country that doesn’t discriminate between fame and infamy, the latter presents itself as plainly more achievable. Hence I am no longer amazed by the frequency of public rampages with loaded automatics but by the fact that every ambitious citizen in America is not atop a shopping center looped with refills of ammunition (p.197).

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<sup>235</sup> Lionel Shriver, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (London: Serpent’s Tale, 2005), p.430

<sup>236</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The Age of Horrorism’

As Eva reasons, such acts of arbitrary violence are undoubtedly tragic, yet they function to imbue their perpetrators with a sense of individuality that is ordinarily evaporated by the ideological functioning of contemporary culture which homogenises individuals into anonymous subjects.<sup>237</sup>

This conflicting sense of a desire to be noticed, or rather, to project and have validated a coherent identity, is key to the novel's examination of Kevin's motivations. Similarly to *Saturday*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* might usefully be thought of as a novel of introspection. Eva's frustrated need to glean from Kevin the possible reasons behind the atrocity is replicated within the reader, yet ultimately this shared desire for resolution remains unsatiated. The narrative fails to expose the root cause of Kevin's murderous aggression, but rather, written from the perspective of Eva, outlines and meditates upon the possible causes.<sup>238</sup> She is haunted throughout the novel by the sense of meaninglessness that defines Kevin's act, but it is paradoxically confirmation of his incomprehensible lack of motive that provides her with comfort. Towards the end of the novel, as Kevin is preparing to be transferred to an adult penitentiary, Eva, two years after the event, asks her son for the first time, 'why?' Meeting her gaze 'with supreme difficulty,' he responds: 'I used to think I knew [...] Now I'm not so sure.' In a rare display of physical affection, Eva reaches forward and clasps her son's hand, consoled by the uncertainty of his response, reasoning that 'for Kevin, progress was deconstruction. He would only begin to plumb his own depths by

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<sup>237</sup> As Eva waits to visit Kevin in the juvenile detention centre, she revels in the attention given to her by another prisoner's mother. As Loretta Greenleaf sympathises with her situation, reassuring her 'it hard to be a momma' (p.195), Eva responds sardonically to her question as to whether Kevin feels remorse, asking: 'What could he conceivably regret? Now he's *somebody*, isn't he?' (p.194). Indeed, as she reflects upon the conversation later in the evening, she concludes: 'What Kevin did *Thursday* and what I did in Claverack's waiting room today depart only in scale. Yearning to feel *special*, I was determined to capture someone's attention, even if I had to use the murder of nine people to get it' (p.197).

<sup>238</sup> Interestingly, the 2005 *Serpent's Tail* edition of the novel is appended with a list of reading group questions emerging in the United States since the novel's original publication. While eleven questions are listed, the sense of the novel's irresolution features within most: 'What do you think ultimately motivated Kevin to stage *Thursday*?'; 'Was Kevin just born wicked, or is his cold heart the inevitable consequence of an unaffectionate mother?'; 'Does the novel truly explain why high school killings have become a social phenomenon in the United States?'. While there is a certain rapidity to such questions, that they are asked seemingly provokes a wider debate addressing both the responsibilities of the author and the expected didactic function of literature: in engaging with a recognisable 'social phenomenon', does the novel have a social and/or moral responsibility to explain to its readers the motivations behind such acts? Clearly, debates surrounding the function of literature are well established, but it is interesting to note that such concerns seem to possess a heightened currency within the contemporary, post-9/11 moment. This notion will be explored more considerably in chapter four of this study.

first finding himself unfathomable' (p.464). Indeed for Kevin, it is paradoxically the unfathomable nature of his act that imbues it with meaning.

Eva notes how Kevin is 'obsessed with those Columbine kids, who upstaged him only twelve days later with six more fatalities' (p.284), and certainly throughout the narrative, he remains adamant that his seemingly motiveless act is incomparable from the 'circus' of the massacre and similar high-school shootings. He dismisses Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as hopeless geeks who 'had no idea what kind of a statement they were making,' and moreover derides their seemingly farcical plan to end their 'Big Day' by hijacking a jet and flying it into the World Trade Center (p.416) – the novel's only prophetic allusion to 9/11. His disdain for such acts and need to distinguish himself from their perpetrators is not, as Eva would seem to infer, a result of his feeling eclipsed by their having carried out greater, more shocking atrocities. Rather, the relatively elementary manner in which such events are seemingly consumed and rationalised by the media – primarily through an appeal to the disturbed mind of the teenage gunmen – functions, in Kevin's mind, to banalize them. Eva makes reference to the 'now fashionable revenge-of-the-nerds interpretation of these incidents, which were now meant to teach us not stricter gun control but concern for the agonies of the underage outcast' (p.336), and indeed in making the atrocity comprehensible in this way, it can be effectively processed and consumed by wider society. In refusing to offer a definitive explanation for why he carried out the attack at Gladstone High, his murderous act remains unfathomable and thus, as proposed by Haddad, the event, and by association Kevin, resists incorporation into the contemporary culture. In remaining unfathomable, the event functions to rupture the banality of the contemporary social fabric; such an act of meaningless violence is that which, paradoxically, imbues meaning.

Although unsure of his motivations behind the attack, this is a notion that Kevin acknowledges, suggesting that the wider social collective guiltily craves such meaningless acts, since they serve to interrupt the pervasive boredom that characterises contemporary existence. This societal yearning for sensationalism is corroborated by the transmission of a television documentary that chronicles the massacre at Gladstone High and, in seeking to probe his psyche – presumably as a means to expose his underlying instability, and thus 'explain' the event – includes an interview with Kevin. Originally entitled 'Extracurricular Activities' but later renamed to 'the punchier "Bad Boy"' (p.411), the very nature of the documentary

substantiates Kevin's hypothesis. Asked in the interview about the motivations behind his attack, he rationalises:

It's like this. You wake up, you *watch* TV, and you get in the car and you *listen* to the radio. You go to your little job or your little school, but you're not going to hear about that on the 6:00 news, since guess what. *Nothing is really happening*. [...] The way I see it, the world is divided into the watchers and the watchees, and there's more and more of the audience and less and less to see. [...] On April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1999, I jumped *into* the screen, I switched to watchee. Ever since, I've known what my life is about. I give good story. It may have been kinda gory, but admit it, *you all loved it*. You *ate it up*. [...] Without people like me, the whole country would jump off a bridge, 'cause the only thing on TV is some housewife on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* winning \$64,000 for remembering the name of the president's dog (pp.414-417).

For Kevin, the fundamental meaninglessness of the atrocity is precisely what the public craves; for in its utter incommensurability, the event functions to rupture the vapidness that characterises contemporary culture. In a society where 'nothing really happens', such an act destabilises the innocuous mundanity of existence, and that the event resists cultural incorporation is profoundly where its significance lies. As Ballard would contend in 2004, 'in our totally pacified world the only acts that will have any significance will be acts of meaningless violence';<sup>239</sup> a proposition that is of central concern to his 2003 novel *Millennium People*.

In a 2005 interview exploring the problematic nature of contemporary reality, Ballard considers the extent to which the events of 9/11 might 'constitute a kind of meaningless act'. He reflects:

If a hostile act in particular has some sort of obvious point ... if you're an anti-globalization protestor and you picket the offices of some multinational company, or even if you blow up their showroom windows, everybody understands – they may disapprove, but they understand. But on the other

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<sup>239</sup> J.G. Ballard quoted in 'Age of Unreason', Jeannette Baxter in *Guardian* (June 22, 2004) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jun/22/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.jgballard>> (accessed 05.05.08)

hand, a meaningless act really unsettles people for obvious reasons, because we look for logic.<sup>240</sup>

Aside from the obvious cost to human life, for Ballard the reason that the events of 9/11 were, and indeed continue to be, so unsettling, is precisely because they constitute meaningless acts of violence. He argues that as an attack on American ideology, ‘there were other and better targets in a way: the Capitol in Washington, the White House, the Pentagon itself – one plane obviously wasn’t going to do enough damage.’<sup>241</sup> Like Kevin’s act, 9/11 possesses such resonance and continues to permeate the contemporary consciousness because it remains so unfathomable. Despite the multitude of studies, and indeed the vast number of fictions engaging with it, it remains a profoundly unprocessed event that, in eluding rationalisation, destabilises and undermines the passivity of Western consciousness. As Richard Gould, a key character in *Millennium People* reasons:

People don’t like themselves today. We’re a rentier class left over from the last century. We tolerate everything, but we know that liberal values are designed to make us passive. [...] We’re living in a soft-regime prison built by earlier generations of inmates. Somehow we have to break free. The attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 was a brave attempt to free America from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The deaths were tragic, but otherwise it was a meaningless act. And that was its point.<sup>242</sup>

Implicit to Gould’s diagnosis of the contemporary age, and seemingly replicating the theory outlined by Haddad in *Mao II*, is the sense that such acts of meaningless violence – either on a global level, as with 9/11, or on a relatively local scale, as with the case of Jill Dando’s murder (also alluded to in *Millennium People*) – might accurately be construed as inevitable responses to the depthless superficiality that characterises the postmodern condition. With this in mind, it might be argued that 9/11, rather than marking the final demise of postmodernism, should instead be viewed as an exacerbated symptom of an already existing mood of postmodern

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<sup>240</sup> J.G. Ballard in ‘JGB Beats Around the Bush ... and Finds Hollywood’, V. Vale (November 2, 2004) <[http://www.rickmcgrath.com/jgballard/jgb\\_beatsthebush.html](http://www.rickmcgrath.com/jgballard/jgb_beatsthebush.html)> (accessed 04.05.08) [first published in *Arthur Magazine*, February 15, 2005]

<sup>241</sup> Ibid

<sup>242</sup> J.G. Ballard, *Millennium People* (2004; London: Harper Perennial, 2008), pp.139-140

exhaustion, which continues unabated into the new millennium. Set within the post-9/11 climate, yet additionally drawing from events occurring prior to 2001 (the narrative also alludes to the Hungerford Massacre of 1987), *Millennium People* seemingly supports such a hypothesis.

The novel opens with a bomb being detonated by an unknown perpetrator at Heathrow airport. In a time where, as Perowne notes, ‘airliners look different [...] predatory or doomed,’ the chosen target is perhaps unsurprising; yet for Ballard, the airport possesses an additional resonance within the late-capitalist moment. Welcoming its ‘transience, alienation and discontinuities, and its unashamed response to the pressures of speed, disposability and the instant impulse,’ Ballard, writing in 1997, explores the cultural significance of the airport as a space of liminality. Arguing that the contemporary city is a space where the individual is continually defined and conditioned by their physical and ideological relationship to the environment (a notion to be explored within the following chapter), he notes: ‘visiting London, I always have the sense of a city devised as an instrument of political control. [...] The labyrinth of districts and boroughs, the endless columned porticoes that once guarded the modest terraced cottages of Victorian clerks, together make clear that London is a place where everyone knows his place.’ In contrast, he suggests that within the airport:

The individual is defined, not by the tangible ground mortgaged into his soul for the next 40 years, but by the indeterminate flicker of flight numbers trembling on an annunciator screen. We are no longer citizens with civic obligations, but passengers for whom all destinations are theoretically open. [...] Airports have become a new kind of discontinuous city, whose vast populations, measured by annual passenger through-puts, are entirely transient, purposeful and, for the most part, happy.<sup>243</sup>

Written only four years prior to 2001, Ballard’s sanguine rendering of the airport seems awkwardly passé within the post-9/11 moment; his declaration that ‘above all airports are places of good news’<sup>244</sup> sits particularly uncomfortably. Indeed, whereas his imagining of the airport in 1997 was characterised by a certain optimism, within *Millennium People* the airport is imagined as a space that, in offering a microcosmic

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<sup>243</sup> J.G. Ballard, ‘Airports: The Cities of the Future’ in *Blueprint*, Issue 142 (September, 1997), p.26

<[http://www.getthatmag.com/JG\\_Ballard\\_Airports.pdf](http://www.getthatmag.com/JG_Ballard_Airports.pdf)> (accessed 05.05.08)

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid*, p.28

representation of the city, emphasises the pervasive alienation of the contemporary (middle-class) subject.<sup>245</sup>

The novel follows, and is narrated by, respected psychologist David Markham as he ventures to discover the organisation behind the bombing in Terminal 2 that killed his ex-wife. With no one claiming responsibility for the attack and the choice of target seemingly arbitrary – ‘a group of bank couriers, holidaymakers and Swiss wives visiting their London-based husbands’ (p.30) – Markham attributes the event to one of the increasingly prevalent acts of meaningless violence designed to interrupt the ‘vicious boredom [that] ruled the world’ (p.28). Observing that ‘protest movements, sane and insane, sensible and absurd, touched almost every aspect of life in London, a vast web of demonstrations that tapped a desperate need for a more meaningful world’ (p.37), he attends a series of disparate rallies<sup>246</sup> as a means to trace the perpetrator of the Heathrow attacks. Entranced by the ubiquitous sense of social disaffection, however, Markham’s personal motivations are quickly displaced by the collective lure of anarchy, and following his encounter with Kay Churchill, a film studies lecturer, and Gould, a disgraced former paediatrician, he becomes fully entrenched within the mood of ensuing rebellion.

Responsible for the Heathrow bombing, Gould exploits the momentum of the attack to stimulate the middle-class residents of Chelsea Marina into revolt. A housing estate whose affected name is attributed to an ‘estate agent’s con,’ designed to draw in ‘all those middle managers and civil servants just scraping by’ (p.51), the complex serves to illustrate the ideological interpellation, and consequent alienation, of the contemporary middle-classes. In a humorous twist on traditional narratives of

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<sup>245</sup> Within his celebratory article, Ballard prophesies that ‘the airport will be the true city of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.’ While the ‘discontinuities of metropolitan life’ function to reinforce the profound alienation of the urban-dweller – he notes how he and his friends live an ‘isolated’ existence, surrounded as they are by neighbours who are fated to remain strangers – the airport of the new millennium, as envisaged by Ballard, ‘defuses these tensions, and offers its passengers the pleasures and social reassurance of the boarding lounge’, which in forming an ‘instantly summoned village,’ subsumes ‘class and national distinctions’ and instead enables the formation of a ‘unitary culture’ (‘Airports: The Cities of the Future’). The utopian rendering of the airport as a cosmopolitan space that releases the individual from his ideologically-defined existence and further allows for the formation of a collective consciousness, is displaced within *Millennium People* by its being conceived as a space that reflects the mundanity of contemporary existence. As Markham and his current wife, Sally, negotiate the roads surrounding Heathrow, he observes how they are ‘part of an invisible marine world that managed to combine mystery and boredom’ (p.25).

<sup>246</sup> Having attended rallies motivated by clearly defined causes (those against globalisation, nuclear power and the World Bank), it is significant that it is at the ‘endearingly Quixotic’ protest at the Olympia cat show that Markham falls victim to the meaningless violence of the protestors (pp.34-42).



class struggle, within the novel it is the disaffected middle-classes that are to be feared. Positioned as ‘the new proletariat’ (p.64), the subversion of class tensions is perhaps most apparent as Markham recounts Chelsea Marina’s steady degeneration into ‘a high-priced slum’: ‘cleaners, traditional working class to the core, refused to enter the estate, put off by the menacing middle-class air’ (p.198). Within the class struggle depicted within the narrative, it is the middle-classes, and not the traditional proletariat, that are victim to societal and ideological alienation. Indeed, in assessing the nature of subjectivity explored within Ballard’s trilogy of detective thrillers, *Cocaine Nights*, *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People*, Gasiorek suggests that ‘alienation marks virtually every aspect of communal life [...] the saturation of social existence by capitalist logics being so complete that the possibility of experiencing life in a non-alienated form is portrayed as a utopian dream.’<sup>247</sup> Such an assessment, while broadly accurate, might need to be refined, however, when considering *Millennium People*; for the representation of the docile middle-classes suggests such a total functioning of ideology, that for many even dreaming of the possibility of a non-alienated existence is inconceivable, so conditioned are they by hegemonic discourse.

Louis Althusser succinctly defines ideology as representing ‘the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,’<sup>248</sup> and key to his understanding is the sense of ideology imbuing subjects with a false consciousness, or rather a false sense of their own autonomy. For Althusser, the covert workings of the Ideological State Apparatuses function to interpellate ‘concrete individuals as concrete subjects,’<sup>249</sup> while fostering the belief that they possess free-will. Similarly to Gramsci’s conception of hegemony, the ideological apparatuses function to encourage specific modes of belief and behaviour that are beneficial to the state by naturalising them, and making them seem an obvious ‘choice’. Though multiple, the (overdetermined) apparatuses exist within a complex network so while the subject is able to ‘choose’ which institutions he affiliates himself with – which political party he votes for; which religious denomination he is inclined towards; which newspapers he reads; and so on – the broader ideology of the state continues to interpellate him regardless. Moreover, since ‘ideology is eternal,’ Althusser proposes that there is no

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<sup>247</sup> Andrzej, Gasiorek. *J.G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.174

<sup>248</sup> Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation’ in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, tr. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), p.109

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid*, p.117

existence outside of that which is ideologically defined: ‘Ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*.’<sup>250</sup>

While the novel’s depiction of a passive middle-class society seemingly reflects the clandestine functioning of ideology as detailed above, Ballard’s rendering of contemporary subjectivity marks a progression from Althusserian thought, for as is clear when Markham and Kay canvas the residents of Twickenham – ‘the Maginot Line of the English class system’ (p.85) – sectors of the middle-class are not only aware of their ideological conditioning, but indeed actively embrace it. Under the pretence of conducting a survey addressing social habits, Kay asks the residents a number of provocative questions designed to expose their docility and provoke the insurgency necessary to free the enslaved middle-classes from their manacled existence. The panoptic structure of their community, where they police themselves and others ‘not with guns and gulags, but with social codes’ (p.89), ensures their continued passivity, and so renders Kay’s task seemingly futile. In addressing the topic of foreign holidays with one resident, for instance, she asks whether travel might be conceived as a ‘kind of confidence trick,’ inferring that the British tourist’s engagement with a foreign culture is so detached from the reality of the country they are visiting, that they ‘might as well stay home and watch it on television.’ As a means to expose the extent to which individuality is suppressed by the system, Kay suggests that the whole experience of travelling amounts to a form of ideological inculcation, where subjects, in buying into a generic experience – ‘the same hotels, the same marinas, car-rental firms’ – are conditioned to behave in a specific manner. Rather than inciting even a modicum of disaffection, however, the resident explains that ‘people like going to airports’ primarily because ‘they can pretend they’re someone else’, and that they ‘want to be brainwashed’ (p.90). Indeed, throughout the novel, the middle-classes are shown to be wholly complicit to their alienation. As Markham muses upon the positioning of a large housing estate built within the shadow of Heathrow Airport, Gould explains its appeal:

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid, p.119

Starter homes. [...] Rabbit hutches for aspiring marrieds. The first taste of middle-class life. [...] They like that. They like the alienation. [...] There's no past and no future. If they can, they opt for zones without meaning – airports, shopping malls, motorways, car parks. They're in flight from the real (p.133).

The notion of the docile middle-classes being 'in flight from the real' is central to the novel, and set against the background of such a banal, pacified society, the narrative explores the allure of arbitrary acts of violence to remedy the profound meaninglessness of such an ideologically determined existence; such acts, in rupturing the passive façade of contemporary society, seek to embrace the return of the real.

The extent to which such arbitrary acts might displace the banality of contemporary existence is, however, shown to be contentious. As Althusser proposes, 'individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects,' and as such, there is no position external to that which is ideologically determined. Any social, or indeed, individual act, then, is inextricably filtered through and determined by ideology. Certainly, within the novel, the portrayal of the rebellion in Chelsea Marina, which is a collective reaction against the enforced passivity of the middle-classes, is itself a profoundly middle-class enterprise that serves to validate, rather than repudiate, their social docility. Conceived by Kay as the instant when the middle-classes, 'victims of a centuries-old conspiracy,' cast aside 'the chains of duty and civic responsibility' (p.9), Ballard's rendering of the insurgency within the marina repeatedly undermines the utopian vision as foreseen by the bourgeois revolutionaries. The narrative is permeated throughout with observations that evince the utter futility of the rebellion, and moreover affirm the unmitigated ideological interpellation of its middle-class insurgents. Initially referred to by Markham as 'the upholstered apocalypse' (p.67), the rebellion is seemingly doomed from its inception: the oxymoronic conservative anarchists, 'as ever considerate of their neighbours,' order a number of skips prior to the revolution, and return to tidy up, pushing a burnt out Volvo into a parking bay, since 'the proprieties still ruled' (p.8). Indeed, the rebellion is so profoundly middle-class, and its revolutionaries so thoroughly conditioned by ideology, that the mutinous activities, which are 'so modest and well behaved that almost no one had noticed' (p.3), are scheduled around their bourgeois lifestyles: surprised on returning to a quiet Chelsea Marina, Markham later discovers that 'the

revolution had been rescheduled to a more convenient day. The middle-class rebels valued their leisure, and the assault on the barricades would be squeezed between concert and theatre visits and the pleasures of fresh seafood' (p.99).

The rebellion is not, however, limited to the confines of Chelsea Marina; rather Gould uses the insurgency of its residents as a pretence to stage more nihilistic acts of terror, conducting a series of attacks upon the City's cultural 'temples of enlightenment', including the British Film Theatre, Tate Modern and the BBC. Indeed he confirms that the uprising of the middle-classes, as manifested in the micro-revolution at the marina, is fated to insignificance; the revolutionaries are 'too polite and too frivolous', and more importantly, he envisages that the event, in its relative simplicity, will be too easily processed and incorporated into the culture, and as such will be quickly forgotten (p.170). For Gould, as with Haddad and Kevin, in such a passive society, only the utterly meaningless act retains significance. He explains to Markham:

A pointless act has a special meaning of its own. Calmly carried out, untouched by any emotions, a meaningless act is an empty space larger than the universe around it. [...] Kill a politician and you're tied to the motive that made you pull the trigger. Oswald and Kennedy, Princip and the Archduke. But kill someone at random, fire a revolver into a McDonald's – the universe stands back and holds its breath. [...] Violence is like a bush fire, it destroys a lot of trees but refreshes the forest, clears away the stifling undergrowth, so more trees spring up (pp.176-177).

As Gasiorek contends, in *Millennium People* 'violence becomes the source of a negative sublime that seeks to out-bid the world itself.'<sup>251</sup> If the ideologically-determined existence of the middle-classes is perceived as a 'flight from reality', or rather in Althusser's model, a passive reflection of reality, then such sublime acts of meaningless violence incite a new realm of the 'real' which, paradoxically, is decidedly more meaningful. It is perhaps for this reason that for many, the incomprehensible acts of 9/11 are thought to have engendered such a profound cultural shift. In precipitating a sudden 'excess of reality,' the terrorist attacks of 2001 immediately shattered, albeit momentarily, the banal docility of Western existence,

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<sup>251</sup> Andrzej, Gasiorek. *J.G. Ballard*, p.198

and opened up a space for philosophical, ethical and moral contemplation. That 9/11 remains largely unprocessed, and moreover, that the contemporary moment, with its designator ‘post-9/11,’ continues to be defined by the event, seemingly attests to its interpretation as an act of meaningless violence. As is implicit to *Millennium People*, however, the extent to which the post-9/11 world might be conceived as more meaningful is clearly debateable. Just as at the end of the narrative, the residents of Chelsea Marina return to their unremarkable lifestyles and re-embrace their existence of ideological passivity, so too within the post-9/11 moment, the initial fear induced by the event is, over time, transformed into a pervasive but banal anxiety.

## 2.6 The Dawning of the Age of Anxiety?

Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.<sup>252</sup>

Written on the dawn of the Second World War, Auden’s poem ‘September 1, 1939’ was frequently reappropriated in the days and weeks 9/11. While recited versions were frequently abridged, the poem neatly encapsulates the anxiety that (putatively) permeates the altered global mood and the fears that would continue to amass as the impending War on Terror gained momentum. *The Guardian*’s reproduction of the poem three days after the event is reduced to three rather than nine stanzas, and interestingly omits the four lines that, within the emergent age of anxiety, possess the greatest resonance: ‘I and the public know / What all schoolchildren learn, / Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return.’<sup>253</sup> In assessing the manner in which individuals and collective societies are affected by and process trauma, Versluys contends:

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<sup>252</sup> W.H. Auden, ‘September 1, 1939’ in *W.H. Auden: Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p.86, ll.6-11

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid*, ll.19-22

Simply in order to cope, people have no choice but to rummage through the symbols that the culture puts at the disposal of the distraught individual. Trauma leads to numbness, flashbacks, or nightmares. These intrusive symptoms can only be dealt with when a traumatic memory gets situated within a series of events. Trauma must be given a place within one's recollection in order to be (se)cured.<sup>254</sup>

That, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, society turned to its authors as a means to explain the event, attests to Versluys' hypothesis. Indeed, he goes on to suggest that 'the discursive responses to 9/11 prove, over and beyond their inevitability, that the individual is not only made but also healed – made whole – by the necessary mechanisms of narrative and semiosis.'<sup>255</sup> While the regenerative power of the narrative, as proposed by Versluys, might need to be tempered – as affirmed by the number of narratives still emerging that engage with 9/11, the event remains largely incommensurable – such texts clearly possess a cathartic effect, and that 'September 1, 1939' gained a heightened puissance following 9/11, attests to the significance of literature as a means both to convey a collective mood, and, in situating the contemporary structure of feeling within an established narrative of trauma, to reassure. The initial abridged rendering of Auden's poem within the post-9/11 moment seemingly confirms such a notion. Rather than focusing upon the pertinent sense of anxious uncertainty and foreboding that permeates the poem ('The enlightenment driven away, / The habit-forming pain, / Mismanagement and grief: / We must suffer them all again.'<sup>256</sup>), the piece is reproduced primarily as a means to inspire its reader, and in evoking the image of the fort-like bar, to emphasise the need to unify and collectively process the trauma: 'Faces along the bar / Cling to their average day: / The lights must never go out, / The music must always play'<sup>257</sup>.

The texts explored thus far in this chapter might, as I have suggested, be conceived as novels of introspection. The fictions to be considered within this section of the chapter, however, are seemingly more unwavering in their depiction of a new world order. Significantly, all were published later within the post-9/11 moment than the texts addressed previously, perhaps suggesting the ubiquitous establishment of the

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<sup>254</sup> Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, p.3

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid*, p.4

<sup>256</sup> W.H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939', p.87 ll.30-33

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, ll.44-47

myth of 9/11; for implicit to each is the belief that the events of September 11 provoked the inception of a profoundly altered global mood, defined by a pervasive anxiety. Moreover, in engaging explicitly with the contemporary moment, the texts knowingly play with the tensions intrinsic to the post-9/11 mood, and are, to varying extents, dependent upon the assumptions generated from the myth.

Patricia Duncker's *Miss Webster and Chérif* (2006) follows the eponymous heroine as, following a mysterious illness that, in compounding her societal alienation sees her coming 'to a dead halt'<sup>258</sup>, she travels to North Africa on the advice of her enigmatic consultant Dr Broadhurst. Striking up a brief friendship with Saïda, a descendent from the nomadic desert people now employed within a Westernised hotel, shortly after returning to England Miss Webster is greeted at the door to her small village-cottage by a young man with 'the kind of beauty which silences crowds and persuades elderly pederasts to reach for their flies and their cameras' (p.80), who she instantly recognises as Saïda's son Chérif. Allowing him to lodge with her whilst he attends the nearby university, the novel plays with the anxieties inherent to the post-9/11 moment, primarily through the villagers', and indeed the reader's, gathering suspicions regarding Chérif. While Miss Webster is largely incensed by the prejudice the villagers show to him – encapsulated saliently by her fury when Mrs Harris, from the local convenience store, telephones her in a wild panic to inform her that Chérif is purchasing items using *her* money from *her* purse (pp.120-122) – such is the authority of the myth of 9/11, and the associated demonization of the 'Other,' that periodically throughout the narrative, she herself harbours suspicion towards him. Moreover, implicitly reinforcing the sense of anxiety that governs the contemporary moment, the novel's stance towards Chérif remains ambiguous. As the narrative reaches its conclusion, his duplicity is exposed; he is not Chérif, but rather Chérif's cousin Mohammed. While the nature of his deceit is perhaps unexpected, and indeed muted, his dishonesty encapsulates the heightened sense of unease directed at the 'Other' within the post-9/11 climate, and the sense of anxiety that defines the moment.

Becoming increasingly frustrated as she reads *Das Parfum*, a satirical novel set within eighteenth-century France that had also provoked the ire of Perowne<sup>259</sup>, Miss

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<sup>258</sup> Patricia Duncker, *Miss Webster and Chérif* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p.9

<sup>259</sup> Dismissing the novels of the magical realists included on his copious reading lists, Perowne alludes to the irksome nature in which one novel grants its protagonists 'a magical sense of smell' (p.67).

Webster, in emphasising the sense of anxiety that governs the age, pontificates on the relevance of specific literary genres within the post-9/11 moment:

What had seemed clever and slick to an audience ravished by capitalism and greed, a moral tale of fatuous mass hallucination, no longer intrigued and beguiled. Malicious cunning and scented duplicity seemed cold and out of place in the world transformed by 9/11, a world where the smiling outsider embodied the new threat, those smooth and handsome Arabs with their plausible stories and their faultless manners. [...] Why blather on about surface scents and naked virgins? The world we knew is melting in explosions and black flame from the burning oil rigs' (p.216).

Certainly, from its opening, the novel is clear to emphasise the widespread anxiety that defines the contemporary moment. As Miss Webster, for instance, negotiates the North African airport she nonchalantly observes the 'guards swaggering through the airport in desert storm battledress, carrying Kalashnikovs' (p.1), and filters out as background noise, the announcement, increasingly banal in its repetition, that 'all unattended luggage will be treated as a security risk and may be removed or destroyed' (p.5). Within the contemporary moment, such visual and aural signifiers are testament to the emergent age of anxiety.

DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) conveys a similar mood of cultural unease, and accentuates the assumed shift in global mood precipitated by 9/11, as the omnipotent narrator contends that 'these are the days after. Everything now is measured by after.'<sup>260</sup> As is expounded in both novels, the events of 9/11 marked the transition from an era of innocence to a profoundly darker age of anxiety.<sup>261</sup> Moreover, further to seemingly validating its existence, *Falling Man* additionally suggests the form that the new, post-innocent world order might take. As a mother tackles her grown-daughter's penchant for 'nourishing her fears', she responds to her worries about the future repercussions of the event, by reluctantly surmising:

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<sup>260</sup> Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (Basingstoke: Picador, 2007), p.137

<sup>261</sup> Amis further corroborates such a hypothesis, noting: 'In the late 1990s, if you recall, America had so much leisure on its hands, politically and culturally, that it could dedicate an entire year to Monica Lewinsky. Even Monica, it now seems, even Bill, were living in innocent times' ('The Age of Horrorism').



Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next. Eight years ago they planted a bomb in one of the towers. Nobody said what's next. This was next. The time to be afraid is when there's no reason to be afraid. Too late now (p.10).

Somewhat paradoxically, fear and innocence run parallel to one another. In an age of innocence – an era when a global audience are captivated not by the omnipotent politics of the White House, but rather by the illicit dalliances which take place within – fear of the unknown is prevalent. Mike Davis suggests that ‘when hypochondriacs actually contract the plague of their worst fear, their ontologies tend to be thrown out of kilter.’<sup>262</sup> Experiencing good physical health, the hypochondriac fears the largely unknown effects of viral invasion. When the virus is contracted, and the effects of it become known to its host, the nature of the fear previously experienced is transformed. An irrational fear of the unknown, then, is replaced with a wholly rational anxiety of reoccurrence. Similarly, within a post-9/11, post-innocence era, fear of the unknown is replaced with pervasive anxiety; indeed, such is the omnipotence of the narrative of disaster and its generated anxieties, that they might be considered banal in their manifestation. Slipping into Rumsfeldian rhetoric, it might be argued that the fear of unknown unknowns typified in the preceding era, is, in the aftermath of 9/11, replaced with an expressed anxiety toward known unknowns. It would seem, then, that the events of 9/11 not only signal the inception of a new global mood, but additionally mark the end of the era of innocence, and the dawning of the age of anxiety.

The emergence of a new age is usefully explored in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), where the unrelenting dominance of the disaster narrative leads to the manifestation of a wholly inevitable anxiety. The novel, which stylistically is indebted to the eclecticism of postmodernism – the often fragmented, self-reflexive narrative is frequently interrupted with visual stimuli, culminating in a series of images that function, in the manner of a flick book, to subvert the iconographical image of the falling man<sup>263</sup> – is narrated by, and tells the

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<sup>262</sup> Mike Davis, ‘The Flames of New York’ in *New Left Review* 12, *Second Series* (November/December 2001), p.38

<sup>263</sup> For an examination of the manner in which the form of the novel reflects the problematic relationship between trauma and language, see Versluys’ chapter ‘A Rose is Not a Rose is Not a Rose’ in *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, pp.79-119.

story of, Oskar Schell, a nine year old whose father is killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center. A fictional manifestation of Versluys' hypothesis, the novel situates 9/11 within a wider narrative of trauma, by juxtaposing Oskar's anguish with the emotional breakdown of his grandfather, Thomas, as he struggles to comprehend the devastation wrought by the bombing of Dresden. Moreover, the novel seemingly aligns itself within an established tradition of literary narratives engaging with trauma, with Oskar's portrayal in the novel as a precocious child who beats his tambourine as a means to calm his mood when he is 'wearing heavy boots,'<sup>264</sup> evoking parallels with Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) and his rendering of Oskar Matzerath, the troubled dwarf who relentlessly beats the eponymous childhood toy to focus his mind. The obvious parallel between the two novels seemingly situates the narrative of 9/11 alongside a series of similar events, in this case with the horrific atrocities amassing in Germany and Poland under Nazi rule.

Within *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the unrelenting anxiety precipitated by 9/11 ensures that Oskar's consciousness is continually determined by the event, just as his grandfather and Matzerath are defined by the atrocities of the Second World War:

Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I'm not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans. A lot of the time I'd get that feeling like I was in the middle of a huge black ocean, or in deep space, but not in the fascinating way. It's just that everything was incredibly far away from me (p.36).

Following the actual manifestation of one's fears, terror itself is transformed into something which is both more pervasive and simultaneously, less intense. The anxiety that his realised nightmare might be relived – the actuality of the event transforms the irrational fear into a rational anxiety – engulfs Oskar like 'a huge black

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<sup>264</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), p.2

ocean', suggesting that individual identity is determined largely by an individual's emotional response to external events. That his emotional responses might be tied to a larger collective energy, to the extent that reactions to 9/11 might be thought of as being formed socially rather than subjectively, leads to the suggestion that anxiety itself is naturalised. In this sense, validation for an individual's anxieties can be sought in the larger, collective mood; hence, anxieties that might previously have been dismissed as groundless are, within the age of anxiety, rationalised. This is illustrated in the text by Mr. Black's reaction to the nervousness Oskar displays when faced with the possibility of having to ascend the Empire State Building:

I told Mr. Black that I was panicky, and he said it was OK to be panicky. I told him I felt like I couldn't do it, and he said it was OK to feel like I couldn't do it. I told him it was the thing that I was most afraid of. He said he could understand why (pp.243-244).

While the rationale behind the expression of anxiety may be justified, however, the potential for irrational response remains ominously present. Indeed, the often irrational workings of the imagination frequently serve to intensify the anxiety felt. As Oskar stands on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, he remains mentally displaced from his temporal physicality, since his experience of standing at the top of a vast tower is filtered through the events and projected iconography of 9/11:

When the elevator door opened, we got out on the observation deck. [...] Even though I knew the view was incredibly beautiful, my brain started misbehaving, and the whole time I was imagining a plane coming at the building, just below us. I didn't want to, but I couldn't stop. I imagined the last second, when I would see the pilot's face, who would be a terrorist. I imagined us looking each other in the eyes when the nose of the plane was one millimeter from the building (p.244).

The oxymoronic rationality of Oskar's irrational fears attests to the significance of the disaster narrative, and the associated myths of 9/11 that it generates, as a disseminator of (sensationalised) knowledge. Powerless to prevent his anxieties from intensifying,

the authority of the disaster narrative is such that it represses the rational workings of the conscious mind, and engenders the irrational and indomitable machinations of the subconscious – ‘I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t stop.’ The power of the imagination to provoke the mutation of rational anxieties into the formation of irrational conclusions is further made overt in David Mitchell’s short story ‘Dénouement’ (2007).

Engaging with the notion of prolific 9/11-induced age of anxiety, the text follows Jean and Graham Nixon – the previously incarnated headmaster of *Black Swan Green* (2006) – as they depart from Birmingham Airport aboard a flight with ‘Air Dénouement.’ As the aircraft begins to taxi onto the runway, Jean immerses herself in the new environment; browsing the in-flight magazine and marvelling at the appearance of an unnamed television actor and comedian. Graham, however, like Oskar is engulfed by the ‘huge black ocean’ of post-9/11 anxiety, and becomes transfixed by the apparent physical manifestation of an oft-repeated image:

I miss whatever twaddle my wife spouts back, because my attention is hijacked by a bearded fundamentalist-looking-type sitting in the window seat directly across from us, beyond the famous comedian. Not only his holy beard and general hawkishness set the alarm bells ringing, but his lips too. They are moving in silent prayer. Now, “racist” was one thing I was never called [...] but ever since “9/11” [...] and that Open University for Jihadists better known as “Iraq” opened up, we all have a duty to be vigilant.<sup>265</sup>

Similarly to Oskar, the pervasive functioning of anxiety renders his rational response obsolete; for while he consciously recognises that such racial profiling is based upon a series of prejudiced assumptions, his irrational response is explained by his being schooled by the varying myths of 9/11 (as his logic and placing of specific words in scare quotes suggests).

As is made explicit throughout ‘Dénouement,’ the duty to remain vigilant within such anxious times rests upon particularly problematic assumptions. Terry Smith suggests in his essay ‘The Dialectics of Disappearance: Architectural Iconotypes between Clashing Cultures’, that ‘when fundamentalism comes to the fore, terror is its currency, war is unleashed, and the iconomy is saturated with

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<sup>265</sup> David Mitchell, ‘Dénouement’ in *Guardian* (May 26, 2007)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/26/originalwriting.fiction>> (accessed 06.07.07)

stereotypes.<sup>266</sup> Clearly, the depiction of the bearded fundamentalist constitutes such a stereotype, and moreover the extent to which the image saturates the cultural iconomy reinforces its potency. As such, the target of such dutiful vigilance is identified by his physical likeness to the iconographic representation of the fundamentalist; subsequently, as Nixon discovers, racial profiling becomes an inevitable, albeit repugnant, manifestation of the post-9/11 age of anxiety. Indeed, his suspicions are aroused solely by the physical appearances of the suspected terrorist and his ‘shaven colleague,’ and the extent to which, outwardly at least, they conform to the formula of the identikit fundamentalist that permeates the post-9/11 consciousness. Their general behaviour is not in itself suspicious, yet in observing them through the lens of the stereotype, Nixon scrutinises their every move, interpreting each action as a precursor to a more malevolent act:

Next, I watch him do something that doesn't quite add up. He stands, pulls down a respectable-looking bag from the overhead locker, rifles inside it for a few seconds, and then returns it, without removing a single item. Why would he do that?

The shaven fundamentalist has swapped his Holy Book for his “iPod”. He might be listening to Coldplay or whoever is “Top of the Pops this week”. Equally, however, one of those “Preachers of Hate” could be injecting his brain with some toxic sermon.<sup>267</sup>

The placing of specific terms within quotation marks is significant, for it suggests that Nixon's ‘knowledge’ of both popular culture and, somewhat more problematically, religious extremism, are informed not through empirical means, but rather through an acquaintance with oft-quoted sound-bites. These are not terms that sit comfortably within Nixon's lexicon, yet their impact upon his belief system is undeniable.

With the movements of the two fanatics becoming ever more suspect Nixon intensifies his surveillance, keeping vigil from a vacant seat as the shaven fundamentalist painstakingly undertakes his part of the ‘plot’ inside the confines of the onboard lavatory:

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<sup>266</sup> Terry Smith, ‘The Dialectics of Disappearance: Architectural Iconotypes Between Clashing Cultures’ in *Critical Quarterly* 45.1-2 (July 2003)

<<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8705.00470/pdf>> (accessed 25.07.07)

<sup>267</sup> David Mitchell, ‘Dénouement’

What's he up to in there? My relief that the cockpit wasn't stormed once again turns to anxiety. The lavatory door opens at last, but as the fundamentalist steps out, his bearded co-religionist steps up. The two make eye contact, and the words Cheers Mate and Hope I didn't keep you are exchanged, in Black Country accents. That may sound innocuous, but what code-words do not?<sup>268</sup>

Such is the power of the stereotype, that even the most innocent actions and words are instantaneously transformed into signifiers confirming the impending attack. With Nixon's knowledge of international terrorism having recently deepened following the breaking news in 2006 that British and Pakistani authorities had thwarted a terror plot to simultaneously blow up a number of transatlantic airplanes mid-flight, he goes on to rationalise his own anxieties: 'It's well known how Terrorist A can leave a tube of Chemical X in an agreed-upon location, so that Terrorist B can mix it with Chemical Y. The resultant Chemical Z blows a hole in the fuselage at 20,000 feet.' As Nixon's breadth of knowledge suggests, as the media provide further 'intelligence' to their increasingly apprehensive audience, so the collective social anxiety intensifies; indeed, the accumulation of terror plots, thwarted or realised, seemingly corroborates the assumptions engendered by the myth of 9/11. With apparent evidence mounting, Nixon decides that he must step in to stop the fundamentalists from realising their malicious plot, but unable to devise an effective strategy, he is left asking himself: 'How do you enlighten two men who are ready to blow up an aeroplane? [...] How can we even communicate?'<sup>269</sup>

The problems of communication evident within 'Dénouement' hint towards broader concerns relating to the revitalised tensions between the Westerner and the 'Other' that many have attributed to the post-9/11 moment. In fact, the text itself alludes to the difficulties faced by the author choosing to fictionalise the figure of the terrorist; to what extent can the fundamentalist be presented in the text, without the author seeking recourse to post-9/11 stereotypes?<sup>270</sup> In juxtaposing his own enlightened rationality with the fundamentalists' incomprehensible irrationality, Nixon reinvigorates Orientalist debates; or rather makes 'manifest' a 'latent'

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid

<sup>269</sup> Ibid

<sup>270</sup> These concerns will be explored extensively within Chapter 4 of this study.

Orientalism. Contemplating how he might effectively communicate with such misologists, he balks at the magnitude of such an endeavour, concluding that the essential differences between him and the fundamentalists are incommensurate:

“Wanton Murder” in one means “Martyrdom” in the other. “Kidnapping” comes out as “Rendition” or “Fund-raising” or “Act of War”. I talk of “Enlightenment”: they see “Squalor of the Spirit”. The labour of reunifying two moral spaces is Herculean, no, Protean. Meanings must be reconciled even before people.<sup>271</sup>

Nixon’s final utterance, of the need to reconcile meanings before people, is crucial, and clearly, key to such a unification of thought, is the notion of a compromise that demands a heightened focus on values that are universal, rather than an emphasis upon beliefs that are antithetical. Arundhati Roy contends that in order to prevent future attacks on the West, and indeed *by* the West, a mutual level of understanding needs to be generated that interprets 9/11 as ‘a monstrous calling card from a world gone horribly wrong.’ While acknowledging that the world will never be rid of acts of terrorism, she suggests that if it is to be contained, ‘the first step is for America to at least acknowledge that it shares the planet with other nations, with other human beings who, even if they are not on TV, have loves and griefs and stories and songs and sorrows and, for heaven’s sake, rights.’<sup>272</sup> The need to unify as a collective humanity and acknowledge that which we have in common is a demand increasingly voiced within the post-9/11 moment. Somewhat surprisingly, given the tone of some of his recent polemics, Amis argues that following 9/11 ‘our best destiny, as planetary cohabitants, is the development of what has been called “species consciousness” – something over and above nationalisms, blocs, religions, ethnicities.’<sup>273</sup> Perhaps, as will be explored within the following chapter, DeLillo’s prophesy was accurate: as a means to make comprehensible the event, and to quell the age of anxiety, the future, or rather the present, must belong to crowds.

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<sup>271</sup> David Mitchell, ‘Dénouement’

<sup>272</sup> Arundhati Roy, ‘The Algebra of Infinite Justice’ in *Guardian* (September 29, 2001)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/29/september11.afghanistan>> (accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>273</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Fear and Loathing’

### 3. Species Consciousness and Post-9/11 Subjects

#### 3.1. 9/11, Species Consciousness and the ‘Return of an Ancient Human Universal’

I could see that somewhere, behind it all, everything was connected to everything else, only I couldn't see all the connections, because I wasn't ready. I wasn't used to connections, I was used to the bits and pieces. I was used to the fragments.<sup>274</sup>

Meditating upon the oppressively parochial nature of Innertown, a small decaying coastal town, Leonard, the fifteen-year-old narrator of John Burnside's novel *Glister* (2008) reflects that ‘we should be connected in all kinds of ways to the outside world, and yet we're not ’ (p.78). A provincial novel with a post-industrial dystopian setting, the text offers an intriguing allegory of the fragmented nature of contemporary society, and the increasing need to connect, or else engage with a global consciousness. As Leonard consumes a mug of the mysterious Moth Man's ‘special tea’, slipping into a transcendental stupor, he becomes aware of the essential interconnectedness of the human spirit: ‘Everything's one thing. [...] It's all one. There isn't a me or a not-me about it. It's all continuous and I'm alive with everything that lives’ (p.129). Although his revelation is engendered through a hallucinogenic reverie, the sentiment of his vision permeates the narrative and casts into relief the fragmented, disengaged community of Innertown.

The town is haunted by a spate of incurable illnesses and a ‘blossoming of what, in the old days, would have been called madness,’ that are commonly attributed to the now derelict chemical factory that once existed at the centre of the community. Such is the apathy of the residents that while ‘everybody blames these problems on the plant [...] they don't have the energy to do anything about it’ (p.12). As a number of school children begin to periodically vanish, the ‘community’ increasingly retreats into itself, and rather than uniting in an attempt to locate the ‘lost boys,’ speculates on the role of the evil being perpetrated in the shadow of the plant: ‘The boys had stumbled into one of those secret facilities and been consumed by a cloud of lethal gas; or they had been taken away for tests, either by top-secret government scientists,

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<sup>274</sup> John Burnside, *Glister* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p.213



or by aliens, who had been observing the plant for decades' (p.13). The extent to which the whole of the community, through its indifference, is culpable for the disappearances, is explored throughout the narrative and is made explicit through the fate of the local policeman, John Morrison, who, on discovering the truth behind one of the boys' vanishings, represses his findings and so becomes indirectly complicit to the disappearances of future children. His refusal to act, and indeed his later inability to admit his culpability is, for Leonard, symptomatic of a wider cultural apathy. Accusing Morrison of 'the sin of not wanting to know; the sin of knowing everything and not doing anything about it,' he reflects upon the apparent social ubiquity of such a transgression:

Everybody knows *that* sin. All you have to do is switch on the TV and watch the news. I'm not saying we should try to help the people in Somalia, or stop the devastations of the rainforests, it's just that we don't feel anything at all other than a mild sense of discomfort or embarrassment [...] and its unforgiveable that we go on with our lives when these things are happening somewhere. It's *unforgiveable*. When you see that, everything ought to change (pp.249-250).

Such is the fragmented nature of contemporary subjectivity, that perceiving the establishment of a collective (global) culture is, as Leonard outlines within the opening quote, intensely problematic, or as Graham Nixon contends, an undertaking of 'Herculean, no, Protean' proportions. Following the events of 9/11, however, the need to achieve such an endeavour becomes increasingly apparent.

In assessing the public outpouring of grief by Americans following the event, Arundhati Roy comments that 'it will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try to understand why September 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own.'<sup>275</sup> Seemingly pre-empting Leonard's logic, Roy emphasises the extent to which the atrocity should necessarily elicit a fundamental reassessment of the West's position within the global totality: having witnessed the event, 'everything ought to change.' The expressed need for America, and the West more generally, to resituate itself within a larger global consciousness, is replicated within many of the articles and

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<sup>275</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'The Algebra of Infinite Justice'

studies engaging with the events of 9/11, and indeed is a concern that permeates much of the fiction published within the contemporary moment. Certainly such narratives engender and maintain the belief that the terrorist attacks of September 11 induced a profound shift in cultural mood, and moreover, in evoking the necessary change in human character precipitated by such ‘species consciousness,’ so the myth of 9/11 is authenticated. This chapter addresses such concerns, and in interrogating the nature of contemporary subjectivity, assesses the extent to which species consciousness might be conceived as a post-9/11 phenomenon; or conversely the degree to which it might be interpreted as being symptomatic of an exacerbation of concerns reacting against the anonymity and social dislocation of the postmodern subject, that predate the events of 9/11. In exploring the genesis of the phenomenon, the first section of the chapter engages with posthuman constructions of subjectivity, while the latter reviews the nature of contemporary urban identity.

For Karen in *Mao II*, the allure of the crowd lies in its potential to imbue the subject with a sense of communal belonging. As a means to counter the inherent meaninglessness that defines postmodern existence, submitting to a broader collective consciousness provides the ‘individual’ – the term is used tentatively, since their individuality is necessarily muted – with an overarching sense of purpose that defies their alienation. Such a notion is expounded in the narrative as Karen reassures the spectral members of the homeless community in New York that their social dislocation is only temporary, for as they prepare for the second coming, the world will be united as a ‘universal family.’<sup>276</sup> While for Karen, much of the appeal of submitting herself to the Unification Church lies in the feeling of security that it provides – ‘we are protected by the total power of our true father’<sup>277</sup> – the sense of belonging, of defining herself through a collective identity, invigorates and paradoxically empowers her; as she dissolves into the thirteen-thousand strong crowd at the Yankee Stadium, she is revitalised by the ‘blood of numbers.’<sup>278</sup> Indeed, throughout the novel, Karen’s existence possesses meaning only when she exists as part of a larger community; defined by her relationship to others, when she suddenly finds herself alone in New York, she instinctively radiates towards the crowd. As Self

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<sup>276</sup> Don DeLillo, *Mao II*, p.179

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.* Interestingly, this seemingly replicates Haddad’s reasoning that societies struggling to remake themselves demand ‘total politics, total authority, total being’ (p.158).

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8

increasingly discovers in *Money*, without the ‘human touch,’ the individual remains fundamentally meaningless.

The incomprehensibility of the events of 9/11, or rather, the extent to which they refuse to be rationally processed, might in part be attributed to the displacement of the human that is inherent to the attacks. McEwan recalls the overwhelming sense of disbelief that he felt watching the events of the day unfold before him on the television screen:

No blood, no screams. The Greeks, in their tragedies, wisely kept these worst of moments off stage, out of the scene. Hence the word: obscene. This was an obscenity. We were watching death on an unbelievable scale, but we saw no one die. The nightmare was in the gulf of imagining. The horror was in the distance.<sup>279</sup>

As a means to make intelligible the event, there is a need to think beyond the actual act, beyond the image of the second plane striking, or the slow collapse of the towers, and locate the human within the tragedy.

It is interesting that the predominant image in British fictions engaging with 9/11 and the ensuing moment is that of the plane. Amis seems to encapsulate the post-9/11 mood when he attests to the now heightened sense of meaning attached to the signifier ‘airplane.’ He comments: ‘I have never seen a generically familiar object so transformed by *affect* [...] That second plane looked eagerly alive, and galvanised with malice, and wholly alien.’<sup>280</sup> Significantly, the image of the second plane striking the South Tower evokes such feelings of disbelief because, like the act of terrorism itself, it is de-personalised. As McEwan suggests, the spectacle provokes a profound displacement of the real, in that the image, though bound to an objective reality, conceals the actual human suffering taking place, and so is processed not by the cognitive mind, but by the imagination. Furthermore, that the individuals remain largely insignificant to the iconographical impact of the event, attests to the dehumanising act of terrorism, where in many cases, it is the number of fatalities, and not the specific particulars of who is affected, that dictates the magnitude of the atrocity. As Terry Eagleton notes:

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<sup>279</sup> Ian McEwan, ‘Beyond Belief’

<sup>280</sup> Martin Amis ‘Fear and Loathing’

Human bodies are comically interchangeable in an orgy, but tragically so in a terrorist bombing or concentration camp. As far as both the predatory and the promiscuous go, any old body will do. You are not granted even the meagre dignity of being decapitated by a suicide bomber because you are you. In massacres, in mass orgies, everyone is just a stand-in for everyone else.<sup>281</sup>

Acts of terrorism, such as those seen on September 11, evoke such feelings of awe-inspiring disbelief – ‘the source of the negative sublime’<sup>282</sup> – not only because of their magnitude, but additionally because their targeted victims are both chosen indiscriminately and moreover remain profoundly disconnected from the event itself. Žižek similarly argues that while the attacks of 9/11, in being widely transmitted, rendered the event ‘real’ to a global audience, for those witnessing it, there was, and continues to be, an essential ‘derealisation’ of horror. He comments that ‘while the number of victims – 3,000 – is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people.’<sup>283</sup> The fact that three thousand people died due to the actions of a minority is clearly hard to grasp; the fact that the victims remain, largely, anonymous, is harder still.<sup>284</sup>

As a means to react against the anonymous act of terrorism, and moreover to render it comprehensible, there is an evident need to deconstruct the unfathomable totality of the event and thereby enable the emergence of the thousands of individual stories that form the collective ‘9/11 narrative.’ As DeLillo suggests, the event has a clear counternarrative constituted by the ‘100,000 stories crisscrossing New York, Washington and the world [...] people running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us.’ These ‘marginal stories’ are, he argues, essential ‘to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set

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<sup>281</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (2005), p.21

<sup>282</sup> Andrzej. Gasiorek. *J.G. Ballard*, p.198

<sup>283</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance’ in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, p.13 Žižek interestingly contrasts the reportage of 9/11 with those accounts of Third World suffering where, he argues, ‘the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail.’ He concludes that such evidence reinforces Orientalist doctrine, since ‘the real horror happens *there*, not *here*.’

<sup>284</sup> While the image of the plane features within much British fiction engaging with 9/11, within the American tradition the image of the falling man is a recurring motif. Unlike the image of the second plane, which displaces the reality of the event from the observer’s perception of ‘the real’ (the concealment of human suffering essentially aligns the image with that of the innocuous Hollywood spectacle), the image of the falling man situates and makes real the human impact of the event.

into our frame of practised response.’<sup>285</sup> It is precisely these stories that enable the location of the human, of the personal response, and thus allow us to begin to comprehend the enormity of the event.

One of the marginal narratives that features frequently in the reports, articles and reaction pieces written in response to the terrorist attacks, is that of the re-emergence of ‘an ancient human universal.’<sup>286</sup> McEwan, writing three days after the event, reflects on the haunting image of two figures leaping from the tower hand in hand. Indeed, in assessing the extent to which 9/11 might have precipitated a shift in human character, the image provides a potent manifestation that suggests a transition from alienation to human interdependency. Implicit to McEwan’s narrative, is the paradoxical assertion that the events of 9/11, acts of terror *against* humanity, actually provoked the resurgence of humanist sentiment within Western society. Certainly, many articles written within the immediate aftermath observe the heightened need ‘for that human touch’ and the necessary implementation of a philosophy of ‘species consciousness.’<sup>287</sup>

The resurgence of an ancient human universal is further evident in the fictions that engage with the post-9/11 mood: Duncker’s *Miss Webster and Chérif* records the progress of the eponymous heroine as, following her realisation that ‘with gathering difference and contempt, that she believed in nothing,’<sup>288</sup> she reconnects with society; in DeLillo’s *Falling Man* Keith, having marginally escaped the towers before their collapse, finds comradeship in his fellow gym-goers as ‘these were the [people] he could stand with in the days after. Maybe that’s what he was feeling, a spirit, a

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<sup>285</sup> Don DeLillo, ‘In the Ruins of the Future’

<sup>286</sup> Ian McEwan, ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion. Love Was All They Had to Set Against Their Murderers’ in *Guardian* (September 15, 2001)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2>>  
(accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>287</sup> McEwan writes how ‘in our delirium, most of us wanted to talk’ (‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’); Jay McInerney observes how ‘in the week following the attack on the World Trade Center, many New Yorkers have felt a need to gather in public, to express a complex set of needs to mourn, to express their solidarity with each other as well as with the dead, the missing and those trying to find them’ (‘Names and Faces that Keep Missing on Our Minds’ in *Guardian*, September 22, 2001); in a letter describing his personal experience of the event, Peter Carey states ‘I have to be outside, among the people [...] I want to stand in the deli by the radio. There I can be with my neighbours’ (‘We Close our Eyes and Say a Prayer, Although I Don’t Know Who I’m Praying To. There Is No God’ in *Observer*, September 23, 2001); and Sukhdev Sandhu, observing the immediate aftermath, records how ‘a woman trips in the middle of the street and a dozen people all rush to help her. Strangers grasp each other by the wrist or the shoulders as they speak; they suddenly need to feel warmth, a human pulse’ (‘Aliens and Others’ in *London Review of Books* 23.19, October 4, 2001).

<sup>288</sup> Patricia Duncker, *Miss Webster and Chérif*, p.33

kinship of trust'<sup>289</sup>; and in McEwan's *Saturday*, Perowne, albeit reluctantly, is drawn towards the common sense of purpose found in the crowd: 'despite his scepticism, Perowne in white-soled trainers, gripping his racket tighter, feels the seduction and excitement peculiar to such events; a crowd possessing the streets, tens of thousands of strangers converging with a single purpose conveying an intimation of revolutionary joy.'<sup>290</sup> It is ironic that the events of 9/11, acts of terror *against* humanity, may have gone some way to provoke the resurgence of species consciousness; implicit to such narratives is the conviction that it is crucial, in such times, to hold on to a common belief in the power of humanity.<sup>291</sup>

The expressed need to connect with other human beings, to console and reassure one another and thus form a collective response to the event, clearly runs contrary to the depiction of the alienated postmodern individual, who is profoundly disconnected from his fragmented society; thus such discursive and fictional evidence would seem to corroborate the myth of 9/11. In the opening chapter to this study, however, I argued, via a reading of Amis's *Money*, that a sense of postmodern exhaustion existed prior to the dawning of the new millennium, and indeed the novel, published in 1984, repeatedly expresses Self's need to connect with others as a means to counter the meaningless alienation of his own disconnected existence. The theories of species consciousness emerging within the post-9/11 moment, then, might be conceived as an intensification of already existing concerns. Certainly, the basis of Amis's 2001 hypothesis can be traced back to an interview from 1997 where commenting on the 'posthuman' status of society, he suggests that 'the new goal will be to get everyone on the planet thinking of themselves as the new member of a species rather than part of a country, or God forbid, a member of a club.'<sup>292</sup> Rather than being interpreted as a post-9/11 phenomenon, then, species consciousness might

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<sup>289</sup> Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p.143

<sup>290</sup> Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, p.72

<sup>291</sup> One might, however, want to question whether such acts as detailed above are not merely instances of 'Western' consciousness. Certainly, appended to Carey's quoted example of the return of an 'ancient human universal' is a remark with a decidedly more ominous tone: 'I want to strike back, pulverise, kill, obliterate anyone who has caused this harm to my city. I have become like the dangerous American the world has most reason to fear' ('We Close our Eyes and Say a Prayer, Although I Don't Know Who I'm Praying To. There Is No God'). It might, perhaps be suggested then, that rather than demonstrating the resurgence of an 'ancient human universal,' the above acts instead suggest a rallying together of (Western) troops against an assumed common enemy. With this in mind, it might further be argued that the frequently commented upon image of individuals jumping from the blazing towers hand-in-hand be viewed as a final act of defiance against the (Eastern) perpetrators: the West will remain unified.

<sup>292</sup> Martin Amis in 'Success. Money. Happy?', Tim Adams in *Observer* (October 12, 1997) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/1997/oct/12/fiction.martinamis>> (accessed 06.06.07)

better be conceived as the symptom of an ongoing frustration with the banal meaninglessness of postmodern subjectivity.

Although devised and carried out by man, the events of 9/11 additionally illustrate the devastating power of technology over humanity. Fukuyama comments that, in time, the attacks might come to symbolise not an act of Islamic radicalism, but rather ‘the broader tide of modernization.’ He goes on to assert that what the event points to ‘is the fact that science and technology, from which the modern world springs, themselves represent our civilization’s key vulnerabilities. Airlines, skyscrapers, and biology labs – all symbols of modernity – were turned into weapons in a stroke of malign ingenuity.’<sup>293</sup> While the attacks may have initially provoked communal acts of solidarity and emergent feelings of ‘kinship,’ of much greater impact is the anti-human iconography of 9/11; for crucially what the terrorist attacks represent is man’s capacity to create and use technology to turn against humanity and destroy his fellow man. As a species man strives to advance, yet it is precisely such developments that pose the greatest threat to mankind. Certainly, within the current age one might argue that it is the spectre of biotechnology that provides hope to, and simultaneously, haunts humanity.

### **3.2 The Human in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility**

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. [...] The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.<sup>294</sup>

In his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Walter Benjamin suggests that those objects ascribed the designator of ‘art’ are, and have always been, susceptible to replication. He argues that ‘man-made artefacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft,

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<sup>293</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2002), xii-iii

<sup>294</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty & Thomas Y. Levin; tr. Edmund Jephcott & Rodney Livingstone (London: The Belknap Press, 2008), p.21

by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain.<sup>295</sup> Even prior to the apotheosis of the era of mechanical reproduction of which he writes, then, artistic replication is commonplace; indeed, its capacity to be reproduced, one might argue, is a defining characteristic of a work of art.

With technological advances rapidly transforming the age of mechanical reproduction, however, the products of artistic replication began to impact more definitively upon the cultural realm. Benjamin asserts that by the turn of the twentieth century, the reproduced work of art ‘had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes<sup>296</sup>; cinematography and photography are, he suggests, good examples of the apparent cultural elevation of the replica. As the opening quote suggests, however, the replica is necessarily lacking in authenticity, since its very status as a reproduction insists upon the transcendence of the original. It does not possess a ‘unique existence’ and, as such, the replica is always destined to be ‘Other.’ Such a hypothesis leads Benjamin to proclaim:

That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. [...] One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.<sup>297</sup>

For Benjamin, the emancipation of the work of art from its ‘parasitical dependence on ritual’, and the replica’s inability to locate its unique place within a staunch tradition, hints towards the potential for a more collective, and indeed democratic, response to art. The mass reproduction of a painting, for instance, effectively serves to liberate the work from the confines of the gallery, making it accessible to a wider demographic.

It might be argued that the implications of Benjamin’s theories are not limited to the replication of artistic objects, and moreover that such concerns continue to remain relevant within the contemporary moment. As such, within this section of the chapter I will, to paraphrase Benjamin, assess whether the very development of biotechnology has not transformed the entire nature of humanity.

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid

<sup>296</sup> Ibid

<sup>297</sup> Ibid



Benjamin suggests that with the apotheosis of the mechanical age of reproduction, ‘the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.’<sup>298</sup> Similarly, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard claims that within the current age, ‘cloning is [...] the last stage of the history and modelling of the body, the one at which, reduced to its abstract and genetic formula, the individual is destined to serial propagation.’<sup>299</sup> Implicit to both studies is the sense that within the technological and biotechnological ages, processes of production have been displaced by techniques of reproduction, to the extent that the object itself has no function other than its capacity to be replicated. Benjamin provides the example of the photographic negative, suggesting that its primary function is to enable one to ‘make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense.’<sup>300</sup> Likewise, for Baudrillard, within the contemporary age, the human body, in being reduced to a base genetic formula, is conceived as nothing more than ‘a message, as a stockpile of information and of messages, as fodder for data processing.’<sup>301</sup> He suggests that the very foundations of humanity, or rather what it means to be human, are problematised within the new era of genetic reproducibility. Reduced to its base formula, it might be argued that it is no longer feasible to refer to a defining human essence; rather, to be human is to be a soulless receptacle, a mere carrier of genetic information that enables, in one guise or another, the continuation of the species. The signifier ‘humanity,’ then, undergoes a profound shift within the contemporary era, to the extent that as a homogenising concept that remains relevant to all members of the species, it ceases to function, and so is rendered meaningless. With advances in cloning techniques, and indeed in (bio)technology more generally, very real fears are raised concerning the moral and ethical future of the human species. As Fukuyama forewarns:

Human nature is what gives us a moral sense, provides us with the social skills to live in society, and serves as a ground for more sophisticated philosophical discussions of rights, justice, and morality. What is ultimately at stake with biotechnology is not just some utilitarian cost-benefit calculus

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid

<sup>299</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.99

<sup>300</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, p.25

<sup>301</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.99

concerning future medical technologies, but the very grounding of the human moral sense, which has been a constant ever since there were human beings.<sup>302</sup>

If in the contemporary age human beings are reduced to nothing more than coded data, then commonly held understandings of ‘human nature,’ and indeed ‘species consciousness,’ clearly require radical reassessment. Many debates surrounding biotechnology centre around this concern; namely the extent to which man’s interference with the ‘natural’ evolutionary process engenders a species that paradoxically becomes less humanlike.

A number of critics have aligned the biotechnological revolution with the inception of posthumanism where, as suggested by Donna Haraway, ‘biological evolution fulfils itself in the evolution of technology.’<sup>303</sup> Within such an era of posthumanism, ever greater and alarmingly more powerful technologies give rise to a more advanced ‘human being,’ but one that is increasingly morally and ethically bereft. Discussing the humanistic implications of genetic engineering, Fukuyama argues that even if ‘on a species level [it] remains twenty-five, fifty, or one hundred years away, it is by far the most consequential of all future developments in biotechnology. The reason for this is that human nature is fundamental to our notions of justice, morality, and the good life, and all of these will undergo change if this technology becomes widespread.’<sup>304</sup> Similarly to Benjamin’s understanding of the replicated work of art, then, the clone, or rather the genetically engineered humanoid, will always lack an aura, or an essence of originality; as a creation of man rather than of nature, it will not be bound by ‘human’ laws of justice and morality, and this is where its principal threat lies.

Clearly, such anxieties are not exclusive to the current age, nor are they concerns explored exclusively within contemporary literature. In assessing the contemporary engagement with the posthuman, this chapter, in considering a broad range of fictions, detects the continuities that seemingly transcend literary-historical boundaries. The portentous figure of the double, for instance, haunts novels from

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<sup>302</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, pp.101-102

<sup>303</sup> Donna Haraway, ‘Cyborgs to Companion Species: Reconfiguring Kinship in Technoscience’ in *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality*, ed. Don Ihde *et al* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p.62

<sup>304</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, pp.82-83

James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) to Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997). It is, however, perhaps Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) that offers the most stark warning against man's intrusion into the evolutionary processes of human nature.

Writing almost two hundred years after the publication of the novel, Fukuyama argues that 'biotechnology presents us with a special moral dilemma, because any reservations we may have about progress need to be tempered with a recognition of its undisputed promise.'<sup>305</sup> Although her form of 'biotechnology' is clearly cruder than that with which Fukuyama is concerned, it is this moral dilemma that Shelley explores in her novel. Victor Frankenstein, although portrayed as an unhinged menace in later incarnations of the tale, is in the novel depicted as a visionary, seeking to push the boundaries of science and nature as a means to solve the ultimate conundrum of life itself:

Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. [...] Pursuing these reflections, I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption.<sup>306</sup>

In this light, Frankenstein might well be viewed as the scientific saviour of humanity, breaking through the boundaries of life and death to provide life eternal. Despite his almost romantic rhetoric, the question as to whether Frankenstein's endeavour is actually conducted in the pursuit of scientific progress, hangs over the novel, and indeed is questioned within his grand vision as he considers how his own status will be affected: 'A new species would bless *me* as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to *me*. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as *I* should deserve theirs'<sup>307</sup> (p.52). Through positioning himself at the centre of his vision, Frankenstein's humanitarian intentions are immediately cast into doubt; rather, his endeavour emerges as a venture to demonstrate, and indeed intensify, his own scientific omnipotence.

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid, p.84

<sup>306</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* (1985; London: Penguin Classics, 1992) pp.52-53

<sup>307</sup> My italics

Similarly, in more recent debates, the ethical implications of scientific advances are the cause of a great deal of anxiety. In his essay ‘Who Speaks for the Human Today?’ Wlad Godzich notes that a primary objection to scientific methods, posed first by religious thinkers and later by philosophers, is that ‘science recognizes no boundaries to its activity or power, and that whatever is thinkable, whatever turns out to be possible, can and should be realized, whether it be atomic weapons or cloning.’<sup>308</sup> Such is its omnipotence, the argument follows, that scientific accomplishment remains blind to its ethical and moral implications; if an experiment is physically possible and enables the transcending of existing scientific boundaries, its pursuit is justified. Shelley’s novel might be seen as testament to these fears, for shortly after the completion of his visionary experiment, the true horror of Frankenstein’s venture is unveiled before him: ‘I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body [...] but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart (p.56). Within the novel, the tension between human nature and man’s yearning to conquer it is made explicit and, as such, *Frankenstein* might be said to deliver ‘a powerful anti-science diatribe that still reverberates as a quintessential parable of the dangers unleashed by technological creation and irresponsible scientists.’<sup>309</sup> An additional reading of the novel, and one that seems germane to contemporary debates, however, is concerned not with the ‘dangers unleashed by technological creation’, but rather with seeking to explore the category ‘human’ itself.

Godzich’s above observation is interesting as it alludes to some of the religious objections to scientific intervention. Indeed, my referring to Frankenstein previously as the potential ‘saviour of humanity’ was not unintentional. Man is righteous, moral and humane, so the argument goes, precisely because he is created in God’s image. As Godzich suggests, ‘at its very core, the notion of human rights

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<sup>308</sup> Wlad Godzich, ‘Who Speaks for the Human Today’ in *Who Speaks for the Human Today?*, ed. Wlad Godzich (Taiwan: Concentric Literary and Cultural Studies: September 2006, Vol.32.2), p.13

<sup>309</sup> Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), p.41

Such a reading is perhaps unsurprising when one considers the historical positioning of the novel. Indeed, in his 1818 Preface to *Frankenstein*, P.B. Shelley, while keen to emphasise the fictionality of the text, immediately provokes a reading of the novel that takes into account its place within a very specific context: ‘The event on which this fiction is founded, has been supposed, by Dr Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence’ (‘Preface’, p.11).

originates in the biblical story of creation.’<sup>310</sup> Any being engineered by man forces a reconsideration not only of the allegedly incontrovertible mandates of natural and divine law, but also provokes a reassessment of exactly what it means to be human. Although sutured together from body parts previously formed in God’s image, the extent to which Frankenstein’s creation is ‘human’ is questionable. Moreover, although the clone is essentially a duplication, and so takes on a human form, its admittance into the species *Homo Sapien* is doubtful; as a creation of man, rather than of God, it is destined to remain ‘Other’. W.J.T. Mitchell writes:

The clone, to some people, represents the destruction of the natural order, and reminds us of the innumerable myths that treat the creation of artificial life as the violation of fundamental taboos. From the story of the Golem to Frankenstein to the cyborgs of contemporary science fiction, the artificial life form is treated as a monstrous violation of natural law. [...] Only God is allowed to make images, because only God is possessed of the secret of life.<sup>311</sup>

The man-made creation of life negates humanity’s need for an omnipotent God, and so, in challenging one of the central tenets of divine law, cloning undermines the very foundations upon which many human’s lives are formed. Moreover, if Fukuyama’s assertion, that human nature ‘is *conjointly* with religion, what defines our most basic values,’<sup>312</sup> the usurpation of the divine power of God by the rising omnipotence of biotechnology has the potential to result in the fatal demise of humanity.

In his 2001 study *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Jonathan Glover, echoing Arnold’s claims made a century previously, attributes the decline of morality in contemporary times to the parallel waning of religious interest – a notion that sits uncomfortably within the post-9/11 moment and the resurgence of religious fundamentalism. He argues that ‘one feature of our time is the fading of the

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<sup>310</sup> Wlad Godzich, ‘Who Speaks for the Human Today’ p.11

<sup>311</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp.16-17

Mitchell goes on to illustrate these anxieties by referring to a cartoon appearing in the *Chicago Tribune*. Within the image, drawing inspiration from his ‘Hand of God’, Michelangelo’s God is pictured with outstretched hand seeking to transfer life. His hand is met not, however, by a receptive Adam, but rather by a dismissive scientist, replying, “Thanks, but we’ve got it covered.” The cartoon, Mitchell suggests, demonstrates ‘why the objections to cloning seem to go beyond pragmatic or practical considerations’ (p.17).

<sup>312</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, p.7 [my italics]

moral law. The idea of a moral law external to us may never have had secure foundations, but, partly because of the decline in religion in the Western world, awareness of this is now widespread.<sup>313</sup> It follows that any processes that contravene religious law will produce amoral, and thus essentially non-human, consequences. This is a concern that, despite its chronological disparity from Glover's study, is similarly explored in Shelley's novel, perhaps most saliently as Frankenstein's creation recalls his introduction to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Comparing his own plight with that of Adam's, he exclaims:

He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me (p.126).

The creature's use of the word 'envy' is telling. As one of the seven cardinal sins, it is perhaps the monster's propensity to the emotion that confirms his amoral status. Created by man in breach of divine law, Frankenstein's creature is destined to be cast aside by both humanity and his creator. Indeed, as man himself turns his back on religion, so too his creations become ever more depraved.<sup>314</sup>

Despite such proclamations attesting to his innate wretchedness, however, the manner in which the creature communicates seemingly undermines his non-human status. Certainly, it is clear to see parallels between his existential outburst and Frankenstein's own reaction to his creation (p.98). Moreover, when recounting his tale, the depth of human emotion that the creature possesses becomes readily apparent; his narrative demonstrates a sense of emotional awareness that could only

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<sup>313</sup> Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001), p.405

<sup>314</sup> On discovering some papers in the clothing of Frankenstein, the monster 'able to decipher the characters in which they were written,' discovers his creator's sense of loathing toward him, and exclaims: 'Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even *you* turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance' (pp.126-127). The passage is particularly interesting, for while it emphasises the monster's fundamental othering, the expression of emotion is profoundly 'human'.

be attributed to an informed, sensitive human being.<sup>315</sup> The narrative emphasises at length the creature's humanistic endowment, suggesting, paradoxically, that his demise into the depraved monster that fills the mind of his creator, is a result of humanity's response to him. He reasons:

Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend [...] Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing? (p.97)

The creature's narrative forces the reader, and indeed Frankenstein himself, to reassess what constitutes the category human. While he possesses traits specific to human beings, as a product of science rather than either human nature or God, within the narrative Frankenstein's creation is destined to remain 'Other.' With the novel open to such contradictory readings, it becomes apparent that *Frankenstein* can be interpreted both as a 'powerful anti-science diatribe' that warns against the irrevocable damage that man can wreak upon humanity, and simultaneously an introspective text that explores the potential evolution of the human species.

Clearly such concerns continue to be expressed within the contemporary moment, and as biotechnological developments continue to advance, anxieties are increasingly expressed regarding its potential to irrevocably alter humanity. In discussing some of the possible implications of recent scientific advances, Robert Pepperell comments that 'the possibilities suggested by synthetic intelligence, organic computers and genetic manipulation are deeply challenging to [the humanist] sense of human predominance.'<sup>316</sup> Indeed, as he goes on to suggest:

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<sup>315</sup> His account conveys his propensity to acquire knowledge and experience transcendent thought: 'I learned from Werter's imaginations despondency and gloom: but Plutarch taught me high thoughts; he elevated me above the wretched sphere of my own reflections, to admire and love the heroes of past ages' (p.125); his sense of awe when faced with the sublime beauty of nature: 'soon a gentle light stole over the heavens, and gave me a sensation of pleasure. I started up and beheld a radiant form rise from among the trees. I gazed with a kind of wonder' (pp.99-100); and his capacity to empathise with the fortunes of those around him: 'the gentle manners and beauty of the cottagers greatly endeared them to me: when they were unhappy I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathised in their joys' (p.109).

<sup>316</sup> Robert Pepperell, *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain* (1995; Bristol: Intellect Books, 2003), p.iii

Humans have imagined for a long time that the ability to develop and control technology was one of the defining characteristics of our condition, something that assured us of our superiority over other animals and our unique status in the world. Ironically, this sense of superiority and uniqueness is being challenged by the very technologies we are now seeking to create.<sup>317</sup>

As biotechnology continues to develop, the age of humanism is displaced by the inception of posthumanism, to the extent that, as Haraway argues, ‘by the late twentieth century [...] we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.’<sup>318</sup> Such is the pervasive influence of science in the contemporary moment that it has become increasingly difficult to decipher the boundaries between that which is natural and that which is artificial. Man merges into machine, and machine into man, to the point where ‘it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine’<sup>319</sup>; so emerges the dawning of the posthuman era and the inception of cyborgisation.<sup>320</sup>

Such notions are saliently explored in J.G. Ballard’s *Crash* (1973), a novel that depicts and explores ‘the spectres of sinister technologies’<sup>321</sup> that infect human life. One of the defining images that the novel projects is that of the human/machine hybrid, and indeed the desire to transcend the boundaries of the traditional human form is made evident throughout the narrative. Certainly, one might argue that the victims of the collisions enter their cars as humans but leave them as cyborgs; as flesh and metal collide, technology is permanently emblazoned on the body. This amalgamation of man and machine is clear as Ballard looks over Vaughan’s scarred form. This hybridisation is represented not only through the indelible marks covering his skin, but is also made apparent through the very terms Ballard uses to describe him:

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>318</sup> Donna Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’ in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p.150

<sup>319</sup> Ibid, p.177

<sup>320</sup> It will perhaps be of benefit here to provide a working definition, since the connotations that ‘cyborgs’ might provoke are not always useful. For the purposes of this chapter, cyborgisation is not limited to the realm of science fiction; rather it is understood to mark the blurring of the boundaries between the natural and artificial. In this sense, many of the techniques of modern medicine might be viewed as processes of cyborgisation; the machines and gadgets employed everyday to make human lives easier, tools of cyborgisation; the beings that undergo such techniques or use such tools, the products of cyborgisation.

<sup>321</sup> J.G. Ballard, ‘Introduction’ to *Crash*, p.4



The whiteness of his arms and chest, and the scars that marked his skin like my own, gave his body an unhealthy and metallic sheen, like the worn vinyl of the car interior. These apparently meaningless notches on his skin, like the gouges of a chisel, marked the sharp embrace of a collapsing passenger compartment, a cuneiform of the flesh formed by shattering instrument dials, fractured gear levers and parking-light switches (p.90).

Even though the translucent scars that litter Vaughan's body provide his skin with an 'unhealthy' pallor, bodies wounded by technology are portrayed in the novel as invigorated and highly sexualised; wounds that have permanently deformed the body become instead orifices in which to explore sexuality. The act of sex itself is shown to be bizarrely abstracted from the body, determined instead by the machine. As Ballard drives through London, he comes to realise that the numerous sexual acts performed behind him are determined and regulated by the movement of the car through the (artificial) landscape:

This marriage of sex and technology reached its climax as the traffic divided at the airport overpass and we began to move forwards in the northbound lane. [...] I realized that I could almost control the sexual act behind me by the way in which I drove the car. Playfully, Vaughan responded to the different types of street furniture and roadside trim (pp.142-144).

Furthermore, the car not only has the capacity to control the sexual act, but for Vaughan, it additionally represents its 'greatest and only true locus' (p.171). The vast majority of sexual acts take place inside the motorcar, and indeed it is only within the confines of the machine that Ballard himself is sexually liberated: 'Vaughan excited some latent homosexual impulse only within the cabin of his car or driving along the highway' (p.117).

Despite the frequency in which the characters indulge, however, sex itself becomes mechanised. Vaughan meticulously arranges the bodies of his partners to mirror those of crash victims, and so can only achieve sexual satisfaction within the context of the devastating power of the machine. For him sex is not a biological, nor indeed hedonistic act, the satisfaction he achieves is clearly only physical, not emotional. Indeed, on observing a test crash, Ballard likens the staged deconstruction

of the car with ‘the sexual penetration of Vaughan’s body; both were conceptualized acts abstracted from all feeling, carrying any ideas or emotions with which we cared to freight them’ (p.129), and moreover, earlier in the text Ballard comments that ‘it isn’t sex that Vaughan is interested in, but technology’ (p.116). As an expression of human emotion, then, within the technological age sex undergoes a profound change. The concept of ‘sexual reproduction’ is wholly negated within the novel, as creation is seen to be not a result of intercourse, but rather an outcome that is initiated by the mechanical destruction of the body: Ballard surmises that ‘Vaughan could never really die in a car-crash, but would in some way be re-born through those twisted radiator grills and cascading windshield glass’ (pp.209-210). Ending their lives as humans, car crash victims are seen to be reborn following the melding of body and machine, and emerge from the ordeal as strangely reinvigorated.<sup>322</sup> Moreover, the victims of the collisions are literally rebuilt, as their broken and deformed limbs are repaired or replaced with mechanical replicas. In this sense, the human is very much reborn as the cyborg. It becomes, then, increasingly difficult to distinguish between man and machine and clearly such a transgression of boundaries threatens the notion of a universal humanity, and moreover inhibits the manifestation of a theory of species consciousness.

Dennis A. Foster suggests that the ability of the car to splice the physical form, as seen in *Crash*, provides ‘a vision of the body as composed of removable, alterable parts. The body and self do not form an organic whole in this vision.’<sup>323</sup> Similarly, one might argue that the advances in biotechnology that have enabled gene splicing, have led to the understanding of the human as the sum of a number of alterable parts. Reduced in this way, the human is somehow mechanised; it becomes a formula; an equation that man needs to master. The novel suggests that within such a technological, posthuman society, ‘beings’ (for they can no longer be described as

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<sup>322</sup> Looking through a series of photographs that Vaughan has collated to chronicle Gabrielle’s recovery from her collision with an airplane bus (the collection captures the immediate aftermath of the crash to her recuperation in a convalescent institution), Ballard notes: ‘The first photographs of her lying in the crashed car showed a conventional young woman whose symmetrical face and unstretched skin spelled out the whole economy of a cozy and passive life, of minor flirtations in the backs of cheap cars enjoyed without any sense of the real possibilities of her body. [...] This agreeable young woman, with her pleasant sexual dreams, had been reborn within the breaking contours of her crushed sports car. [...] The crushed body of the sports car had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality, releasing within its twisted bulkheads and leaking engine coolant all the deviant possibilities of her sex’ (p.99).

<sup>323</sup> Dennis A. Foster, ‘J.G. Ballard’s Empire of the Senses: Perversion and the Failure of Authority’ in *PMLA*, 108.3 (May, 1993), p.524

‘human’) can only connect on a purely physical level; they are dispassionate automatons. Humans, however, are naturally cultural beings that define themselves by their relationship to others. Fukuyama argues that ‘human beings have been wired by evolution to be social creatures who naturally seek to embed themselves in a host of communal relationships.’<sup>324</sup> If man interrupts or displaces the process of natural evolution, then, the human can effectively be ‘rewired’ and programmed to be less dependent upon other members of the species, and more dependent either on technology, or him/herself. Posthumanism, it seems, offers the perfect encapsulation of postmodern identity. As seen in both *Crash* and *Money*, within the postmodern, posthuman period the body, as a mass of constituent parts, is ultimately replaceable: ‘if you lose a rug, you can get a false one. If you lose your laugh, you can get a false one. If you lose your mind, you can get a false one.’<sup>325</sup> (p.27). Moreover, in the sense that it forces a fundamental reassessment of ‘humanity’ as a unified and broadly homogenous concept, and indeed that it encourages social alienation since the individual is effectively master of himself, posthumanism might be perceived as the exemplary manifestation of postmodernism. The rupturing of society as declared by Thatcher in 1987 might be reappropriated as a posthuman manifesto: ‘there’s no such thing as society [...] it is our duty to look after ourselves.’<sup>326</sup> If postmodernism as a cultural dominant has waned within the contemporary moment, however, recent developments in biotechnology suggest that posthumanism has not suffered a similar fate. The anxieties generated from such technologies seemingly parallel the fears generated by the events of 9/11; indeed protests calling for the abolition of such genetic procedures might be likened to the revitalised plea for species consciousness within the post-9/11 moment. Both the age of genetic reproduction and the ‘age of terror’ are defined by a profound anxiety regarding their potential to elicit the irreparable deconstruction of ‘humanity’.

In his study *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Mitchell juxtaposes the two contemporary spectres of terrorism and biotechnology in an analysis that considers the iconography of the destruction of the World Trade Center and of Dolly the sheep respectively. Both images, he suggests, embody current Western anxieties relating to the precarious future of humanity; their efficacy, he

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<sup>324</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, pp.124-125

<sup>325</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p.27

<sup>326</sup> Margaret Thatcher, ‘Aids, Education and the Year 2000!’

contends, does not ‘reside in their topical currency but in their status as enigmas and omens, harbingers of uncertain futures.’<sup>327</sup> Indeed, it might be argued that the potency of the images lie in their power to at once represent man’s technological capacity, while simultaneously exposing the potentially destructive impact of such achievements to the future of humanity. As suggested above, the images of 9/11 might be interpreted as the triumph of technology (although employed by man) over common humanity, and while the seemingly benign image of Dolly does not provoke the same immediate response, the process that the image signifies (broadly, ‘biotechnology’) is similarly unsettling. As Mitchell comments, the benefits of biotechnology are clear, and indeed, instead of being viewed as a violation of natural law, such processes may be seen rather as merely fulfilling characteristically ‘human’ desires. He notes that ‘therapeutic cloning aims to replace worn-out organs and tissues, to restore burned-out cartilage and brain cells’ while ‘reproductive cloning aims to give us a kind of genetic and genealogical immortality, to fulfil even more perfectly a desire that is already manifested in the motivations for having “one’s own” biological children as opposed to adopting.’<sup>328</sup> At the same time as representing hope for the continuation of the species, however, Mitchell suggests that biotechnology, and particularly the figure of the clone, simultaneously encapsulate humanity’s greatest fear: the clone ‘goes before us as a figure of our future, threatens to come after us as an image of what could replace us.’<sup>329</sup> As *Frankenstein* has shown, the master/servant dialectic is extremely volatile, and in this sense, cloning is perceived not an achievement to be celebrated, but rather as marking the realisation of a primordial fear. Biotechnology presents humanity with a very real dilemma, since in embracing such procedures, man effectively becomes master of his own destiny, yet a slave to science. As a means to effectively restore and replenish humanity, the procedures of biotechnology paradoxically have the potential to unlock its demise and to force a reassessment of the deep-rooted notions of ‘the human’.

It is precisely this predicament that is explored in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), which might usefully be thought of as a Bildungsroman for the clone age. As a speculative novel, rather than following the protagonist’s quest for a coherent identity, the narrative does not so much record her troubled endeavour, as

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<sup>327</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, p.12

<sup>328</sup> Ibid, p.25

<sup>329</sup> Ibid

question the very nature of human identity itself. Set in England towards the end of the twentieth century, the novel is narrated by thirty-one year old Kathy as she reminisces upon her childhood and adolescence at Hailsham. A much-revered institution, the nature of Hailsham's purpose is not immediately apparent, yet throughout the narrative the sense of 'Otherness' that defines its students is emphasised. Although there are no real allusions to incarceration, the portentous woods bordering the rear of the building 'cast a shadow over the whole of Hailsham,'<sup>330</sup> and so deter students from leaving the safety of the compound. Indeed, the gates of Hailsham remain firmly shut, with the 'students' securely enclosed within, away from 'normal' society. Located within a hollow, the landscape itself provides a natural barricade surrounding the building from the outside world. Any glimpses of what lurks behind the boundaries of Hailsham are met by the students with an over-enthused sense of wonderment; Kathy explains, 'a car was a rarity, and the sight of one in the distance was sometimes enough to cause bedlam during a class' (p.31). With such recollections, Kathy establishes a clear binary between the existence of those within Hailsham and those wondrous creatures that somehow manage to transgress its boundaries, thus accentuating the students' otherness.

The sense of social alienation that defines the identity of the students is saliently established in the narrative as Kathy recalls the mystery that surrounded the enigmatic figure of Madame and the theory devised by Ruth that readdressed her apparent aloofness. Visiting Hailsham infrequently, Madame's cool reticence toward the students – 'she wouldn't talk to us and kept us at a distance with her chilly look' – is generally attributed to her being 'snooty'. Within the conspiratorial confines of their Junior dormitory, however, Ruth presents another explanation: 'I used to think she was just snooty, but it's something else, I'm sure of it now. Madame's scared of us.' While many of the group dispel Ruth's suggestion – one asks, 'how can she be scared of us? What could we do to her?' (p.30) – a plan is half-heartedly hatched to test the theory, and as Madame next enters Hailsham, a number of students playfully 'swarm' around her, awaiting a reaction. It is precisely at the moment when Ruth's theory is seemingly confirmed, that Kathy's sense of self-awareness is irrevocably destabilised: 'Madame *was* afraid of us. But she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders. We hadn't been ready for that. It had never

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<sup>330</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p.45

occurred to us to wonder how *we* would feel, being seen like that, being the spiders.’ Although her physical reaction to them is relatively muted, ‘she didn’t shriek, or even let out a gasp’ (p.32), Madame’s response serves as the catalyst that tears the students away from the stability of their secure Hailsham-defined existence, and defines them instead as ‘other’:

There are people out there like Madame, who don’t hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you – of how you were brought into this world and why – who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. The first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that, it’s a cold moment. It’s like walking past a mirror you’ve walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange (p.33).

Certainly, there is a sense throughout the novel that the students are unable to clearly define their own personal identity. They are incapable of progressing beyond Lacan’s mirror-stage, and as such, there is always a fundamental misrecognition of the self. While catching her reflection in the austere white tiles of Ruth’s recovery room, Kathy notes that ‘you don’t exactly see yourself reflected back loads of times, but you almost think you do. When you lift an arm, or when someone sits up in bed, you can feel this pale, shadowy movement all around you in the tiles’ (p.16). It is precisely this notion of ethereality that characterises the students of Hailsham. As the surrounding tiles capture her image, the reflected outline of the human form is evident, but its defining features are blurred and difficult to decipher. So too the students are physically recognisable as humans, yet their status as belonging to the species is not so clearly defined.

Their sense of ‘otherness’ is further confirmed by Miss Lucy’s admission that their existence is purposive. As a group of boys innocently imagine how their life might be should they take up acting, Miss Lucy calls for an end to such speculation as she delivers the truth that the students had previously been ‘told and not told’:

None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you. You’ll become adults, then before you’re old, before you’re even middle-aged, you’ll start to donate your vital

organs. That's what each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided (p.73).

The students' non-human status is, thus, affirmed. As creations of man, rather than of an omnipotent celestial power, the students are stripped of human rights and self-determination, and instead experience an existence in which their bodies are reduced to nothing more than organ stores, created to repair and replenish damaged human beings.

As detailed in the previous chapter, James Wood proposes that the shift in cultural mood precipitated by 9/11 might result in an associated transition in the dominant modes and forms of literature. Applying Woolfian logic, he argues that the shift in human character precipitated by 9/11 renders the principal genres of the previous mood irrelevant, and suggests that within the post-9/11 moment, literary fictions will be largely contemplative, communicating to the reader 'how somebody felt about something.'<sup>331</sup> The introspective narratives of *Saturday*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Millennium People* seem to corroborate Wood's hypothesis, and indeed, rather than being interpreted as novels that 'tell us how the world works,' they provoke ontological contemplation. *Never Let Me Go*, while appearing to be a meditation upon the social and ethical implications of cloning, might similarly be thought of as such a novel. Situating the text as a work of speculative fiction, Martin Ryle and Kate Soper suggest that rather than interpreting the issue of cloning as the narrative theme 'we read it as a narrative metaphor, creating (with other metaphorical elements) not a schematic allegory, but a dreamlike parable.' They go on:

The book's questions are about the life we lead, and refer us both to the trans-historic nature of being (the mortality of the body) and to the particular moment of a collective, social-democratic society whose project was to realize, more fully than ever before, the potential, specifically the creative imaginativeness, of every human subject.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> James Wood, 'Tell Me How Does It Feel?'

<sup>332</sup> Martin Ryle & Kate Soper, 'Adorno's Critical Presence: Cultural Theory and Literary Value' in *Adorno and Literature*, eds. David Cunningham & Nigel Mapp (London: Continuum, 2006), p.37

For Ryle and Soper the form of the novel, which contains both realist and magical realist traits, ensures that it resists interpretation as a factual report on cloning, but is equally resistant to ‘obvious kinds of non-realist reading[s]’; the narrative is written within a broadly realist tradition, yet the institutionalised form of eugenics that it depicts is not representative of the specific historical landscape in which the novel is set. The themes explored in the text are not, as Ryle and Soper suggest, simply allegorical, but rather the nuances of the plot provoke philosophical and existential contemplations on the human condition itself. As such, it might be argued that *Never Let Me Go* is clearly of its moment, or as Wood might contend, of the post-9/11 moment.

In his study *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age*, Chris Hables Gray explores the ethical implications of recent biotechnological advances. He comments that while the initial unveiling of genetic experimentation was accompanied by public uproar (he provides the specific examples of the cloning of the first gene in 1974, and the creation and subsequent destruction of the first cloned human embryos in 1993), the realisation of the potential benefits of such procedures soon began to outweigh more complex ethical and pseudo-religious concerns. With the philosophical implications of such procedures increasingly overshadowed, he predicts that future technologies will become more readily accepted – and thus ‘morally’ acceptable – because ‘there are cures and money to be made.’<sup>333</sup> The future of the human species is viewed as paramount, and so forms of intervention to prolong life are to be grasped regardless, it seems, of their potential ramifications.

This is, of course, a notion explored throughout *Never Let Me Go*, and the terms of the debate are succinctly outlined by Miss Emily, who recounts to an expectant Kathy and Tommy that the potential of the emergent scientific breakthroughs and the rapidity in which they emerged, blinded humanity to their potential implications. She explains:

However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease. So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their

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<sup>333</sup> Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age* (2001; London: Routledge, 2002)p.123



best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter (p.240).

Similarly to Gray, Miss Emily emphasises the extent to which society craves only the end result: the remedy for debilitating and terminal illnesses, or the prolongation of life. Such is the desire to achieve such outcomes, that they necessarily remain blind to the ethical implications of such procedures; if the students at Hailsham are identified as 'less than human,' then the conscience of wider society remains clear. While Miss Emily's reasoning clearly evokes ethical debates surrounding cloning, it more significantly provokes reflections upon the value ascribed to human life, and the problematic and contradictory nature of the human condition more generally.<sup>334</sup>

Similarly to *Frankenstein*, the novel is replete with instances that demonstrate the humanity and emotional sensibility of the students; like Frankenstein's creation, they are depicted as much more than automatons devoid of human intuition. Rather, the students of Hailsham express a common need to belong. There is a desire for comradeship, since it is fundamentally the relationships they foster with others that define their sense of self. Indeed, Kathy compares hearing the news of Hailsham's closure with 'someone coming along with a pair of shears and snipping the balloon strings just where they entwined above the man's fist. Once that happened, there'd be no real sense in which those balloons belonged with each other any more' (p.194). It

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<sup>334</sup> Gray further writes how advancements in genetic engineering in 1997 provided hope to those who feared a shortage in transplant organs. Through manipulating a specific gene, scientists at Bath University were able to create headless frogs, whose organs functioned perfectly, despite the absence of a brain. He argues how 'this development is an important step toward the creation of partial human embryos with key organs and a circulatory system but no brain or real body. Some academics argue that harvesting organs from such semicreatures will not violate anyone's rights and would allow everyone to have perfectly compatible organs for transplants.'<sup>334</sup> Clearly, the students at Hailsham are significantly more developed than such 'semicreatures', yet their *raison d'être* is certainly justified by such a theory. Each student, as a clone, necessarily has a model from whom their genetic formula was extracted. As Ruth seeks to validate her existence by locating her model – 'the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity' – a series of disappointments leads her to surmise that all the students are likely to have been 'modelled from *trash*. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos' (p.152). In sum, the students are replicas of those individuals who already have diminished rights. As a man-made creation formed from the genetic information of such figures, the resulting student might feasibly be stripped of all human rights and condemned as 'less than human.' Arlene Judith Klotzko argues that the continual misperception of biotechnology and society's uncomfortable relationship with scientific creation, signals the need to 'convince the wider public that we are far more than the sum of our genes' (Arlene Judith Klotzko, 'Introduction' to Klotzko, Arlene Judith (ed). *The Cloning Sourcebook*, ed. Arlene Judith Klotzko (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.xviii-xix). *Never Let Me Go*, it seems, provokes reflection upon such an issue.

is the collective experience of Hailsham that unites the students, that provides them with a sense of belonging, and ultimately imbues them with a sense of identity. Without Hailsham, or rather, without the collective memory of Hailsham, there is nothing to bind the students together; instead, like the balloons, they slowly drift away from one another, becoming increasingly indecipherable. The title of the novel itself reflects upon the importance of belonging. For what the students seem to fear the most is the idea of letting go; not only of Hailsham, but, perhaps more pertinently, of the relationships that were forged there. Thinking back to their arrival at the cottages, for instance, Kathy infers that it is not so much fear of the unknown that causes the group to huddle together, but rather the fear of losing their overdetermined identity:

There's a sense in which that picture of us on that first day, huddled together in front of the farmhouse, isn't so incongruous after all. [...] Because somewhere underneath, a part of us stayed like that: fearful of the world around us, and – no matter how much we despised ourselves for it – unable to quite let each other go (p.109).

Moreover, despite Kathy's assertion that 'we didn't do things like hug each other much at Hailsham' (p.69), there are frequent instances throughout the text that expose the students' need, similarly to Self's, for the 'human touch'. Regardless of their sub-human status, the students seemingly possess 'the ancient human universal' that binds them together and allows them to empathise and support one another; hardly the actions of soulless ciphers.

The language that the text employs further complicates their humanlike status. The fact that the 'students' of Hailsham are not explicitly referred to as clones is clearly significant, yet one wonders whether in fact the former, more humane term, is merely a substitute for the other. In other words, to what extent does the lexical shift from 'clone' to 'student' signify anything other than a mere deferral of meaning? Clearly, when used by Kathy, the term has different connotations than when used by the Guardians. Indeed, Miss Emily's usage of the favoured, more humane, term is immediately undermined when one considers the context in which she employs it. Towards the end of the novel she explains to Kathy and Tommy the necessity for such an institution as Hailsham, stating that it 'demonstrated to the world that if *students* were *reared* in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to

grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as *any ordinary human being*.' Despite her subsequent account recalling the exhibitions organised where, with the students' art on display, she challenged the public perception that they were 'anything less than fully human' (p.239), her choice of vocabulary is plainly at odds with her humanitarian plight. While she adopts the term 'student' over 'clone', the choice of the word 'reared' is telling. A term more ordinarily employed to denote the maturation of livestock, the word sits uncomfortably within Miss Emily's account of apparent human nurturing. Furthermore, her claim that Hailsham's methods enabled its students to be comparable with 'any ordinary human being', serves only to emphasise their fundamental difference; such a comparison affirms that the students are destined to remain 'other'.

The most pertinent image of the novel is arguably that of a young Kathy who, with eyes closed, clutching a pillow to her chest, slowly dances and sings along softly to a song. The image is a powerful one precisely because it serves to highlight the emotional capacity of Kathy. Recounting her fondness for the song, she remarks:

I didn't used to listen properly to the words; I just waited for that bit that went: 'Baby, baby, never let me go...' And what I'd imagine was a woman who'd been told she couldn't have babies, who'd really, really wanted them all her life. Then there's a sort of miracle and she has a baby, and she holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: 'Baby, never let me go...' (p.64)

The explanation Kathy provides emphasises her ability to empathise, and to understand and embrace the human yearning for love. It is to this image that the novel returns as it reaches its conclusion. Recalling her interpretation of the event, Madame explains her sombre reaction to Kathy's dancing:

When I watched you dancing that day [...] I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go (p.249).

Such is the dilemma posed by both the age of genetic reproduction. Infrequently referred to as a 'post-9/11 novel', however, Madame's reasoning might further situate the text within the contemporary moment, since the sense of the rapid emergence of a problematic 'new world' seemingly alludes to the myth of 9/11, and the transition from a period of relative 'innocence' to a landscape of uncertainty and anxiety. As society's grasp on the old world becomes increasingly weaker, so the sense of common humanity slowly ebbs away, and it is precisely this that Madame mourns. As such, pleas for a renewed awareness of species consciousness might be understood as a call to tighten one's hold; to never let go.

### 3.3 Lost in the City: The Dislocated Urban Subject

The whole city has stopped.

And this is a pause worth savouring, because the world will soon be complicated again.<sup>335</sup>

In a consideration of how subjectivity might be negotiated and contested by issues of physical space, the city emerges as particularly interesting; not least because much postmodern fiction would seem to focus upon the disorientated protagonist's plight to escape the alienation which the ever-degenerating city imposes upon him. Within such texts, the city is often presented alongside characters as an omnipotent nemesis, constantly mediating their identity. Following 9/11, the subject's relationship to the city seemingly becomes increasingly unstable, as the space acquires a more menacing sense of uncertainty. Hans van den Broek, the central protagonist and narrator of Joseph O'Neill's novel *Netherland* (2008) succinctly encapsulates the more problematic, post-9/11, relationship of the urban dweller to the landscape:

Apparently any fool could build a dirty bomb and explode it in Manhattan. How likely was this? Nobody knew. Very little about anything seemed intelligible or certain, and New York itself – that ideal source of the metropolitan diversion that serves as a response to the largest futilities – took

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<sup>335</sup> Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p.5

on a fearsome, monstrous nature whose reality might have befuddled Plato himself.<sup>336</sup>

Of course, van den Broek's observation is specific to New York – indeed, later within the narrative he suggests that the events of 7/7 failed to elicit a similar reaction in England's capital, suggesting that 'Londoners remain in the business of rowing their boats gently down the stream'<sup>337</sup> – yet there is a sense of (banal) anxiety attached to the wider city space following 9/11, characterised in the urban subject by an unremitting sense of apprehension that subsequent terrorist attacks are inevitable: in considering the extent to which 9/11 precipitated a shift in global mood, Perowne reflects that 'the scale of death contemplated is no longer an issue; there'll be more deaths on a similar scale, probably in this city'<sup>338</sup>; while in Jonathan Coe's *The Rain Before it Falls* (2007), sensing 'bad news' within his wife's eyes, Stephen's thoughts fly 'at once to his daughters: to the imagined dangers of central London, to bombs, to once-routine tube and bus journeys suddenly turned into wagers of life and death.'<sup>339</sup> It might be argued that within the post-9/11 moment, the unpredictability of the city space further problematises urban subjectivity; for if the individual is defined by his position to the landscape, then it necessarily follows that the post-9/11 subject is defined by an associated volatility.<sup>340</sup>

Within this section of the chapter I offer extensive readings of Jon McGregor's novels *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2002) and *So Many Ways to Begin* (2006), as a means to assess the nuances of contemporary urban identity. In drawing from Fredric Jameson and Kevin Lynch's theories of cognitive mapping, I interrogate the extent to which contemporary representations of subjectivity react against, or else incorporate, postmodern identity politics. Furthermore, in examining the nature of post-9/11 urban subjectivity, and indeed the extent to which the event might have precipitated a shift in identity politics, McGregor's fictions seem utterly germane. While both texts were published after 9/11, much of his first novel was conceived

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<sup>336</sup> Joseph O'Neill, *Netherland* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), p.21

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, p.172

<sup>338</sup> Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, p.81

<sup>339</sup> Jonathan Coe, *The Rain Before it Falls* (London: Viking, 2007), p.1

<sup>340</sup> Such a notion is explored in Amis's 2003 novel *Yellow Dog*, where Xan Meo's fragmented and volatile identity parallels the degenerative state of the London landscape.

prior to the event, primarily as a fictional response to the death of Princess Diana.<sup>341</sup> Published and consumed within the post-9/11 moment, however, the novel nonetheless offers an evocative (and indeed provocative) analysis of urban identity that adroitly encapsulates the contemporary structure of feeling, particularly through its allusions to the heightened significance of ‘species consciousness.’ Moreover, as a novel that effectively straddles the pre- and post-9/11 moments, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, both in its structure and content, functions to challenge the hypotheses of the myth of 9/11, since it possesses a continuation of theme and form that transcend the assumed cultural shift precipitated by the event. As a means to establish the continuing concerns that impact upon constructions of urban identity, I will briefly consider two visual representations of the city, drawing out the key motifs prior to mapping them onto McGregor’s engagement with the space.

Painted in 1920 by English artist Christopher Richard Wynn Nevinson, *The Soul of a Soulless City* offers an important meditation upon the alienating space of the city, and the manner in which it negotiates subjectivity. The painting presents the observer with an image of a rail track running through skyscrapers, and clearly seeks to epitomise the growing tension in the modern metropolis between man and technology. Flanked on either side by what can perhaps be assumed to be tenement-housing blocks, the track encapsulates the assault of modern dynamism upon the city. Moreover, the railway line seems to serve as a transcendental corridor, transporting the absent individual from the dreary browns and beiges of the residential zone into the Utopian centre, where the clouds seemingly part, allowing the sunlight to beam through in an almost ecclesiastical manner. This would seem to represent the shift in focus brought on by capitalism from the personal to the economic. Indeed, the fact that there are no human subjects present in the painting, but rather only the iconic representations of Western capitalism (i.e. skyscrapers), further attests to the debilitating impact of the city upon human consciousness. For it would seem that in the city, the individual is fundamentally irrelevant.

Captured some eighty-three years later, Roe Etheridge’s photograph *14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, Atlanta* displays a similar evocation of the urban space that emphasises the tension between the city and technology, with the highway creating a large rupture within the cityscape. The dowdy browns and beiges of the foreground are, similarly to

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<sup>341</sup> For further information addressing the genesis of the novel see:  
<<http://www.jonmcgregor.com/books/if-nobody-speaks-of-remarkable-things/background/>>

Nevinson's painting, contrasted with the brighter tones that depict the commercial area. Moreover, the trajectory of the highway, in a comparable way to the rail track depicted in *The Soul of a Soulless City*, helps to draw the observer's eyes towards the commercial region, again suggesting the continued dominance of (depersonalised) economic ideologies. The left of the photograph depicts a construction zone, with the towering cranes alluding to the potential of the city to alter and shift its landscape. Perhaps of most interest, however, is once again the apparent negation of the human subject. This is a space in which the commercial and the technological collide, leaving no room for the individual. It is telling that the presumed drivers and passengers of the cars and lorries are absent from the observer's gaze, thus suggesting that those wishing to enter or leave the city are able to do so only through sacrificing their identity and embracing technology. Indeed, the individual is entirely excluded from the photograph, as is apparent through the presence of the faint outline of a mesh fence in the immediate foreground, from behind which one views the cityscape. The observer too, then, is excluded, with the fence serving as a visible barrier separating the individual from the city.

Similar concerns are apparent in fictional treatments of the city, with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) perhaps serving as an obvious example. Certainly, the continuation of the motif of the city as a dystopian space impacting upon the individual is evident, and clearly the text exposes tensions similar to those evoked in the above examples. Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) offers an equally dystopian, and perhaps more typically postmodern, portrayal of the city, where the actions of an omnipresent power cause the space, and thus its inhabitants, to be in a constant state of flux. Waging a campaign against human reason, the eponymous Doctor barrages the city with images, and thus continually transforms the space:

Cloud palaces erected themselves then silently toppled to reveal for a moment the familiar warehouse beneath them until they were replaced by some fresh audacity. [...] Giant heads in the helmets of conquistadors sailed up like sad, painted kites over the giggling chimney pots. *Hardly anything remained the same for more than one second* and the city was no longer the

conscious production of humanity; it had become the arbitrary realm of dream.<sup>342</sup>

While Carter's imagined city is conceived within a very clear tradition of magical realism, the depiction of the space as 'constantly fluctuating' and its positioning as a 'kingdom of the instantaneous,'<sup>343</sup> remains relevant, since it emphasises the inherent fluidity of the space, and the manner in which the unstable landscape continually functions to exclude and alienate the individual. Victim to the continually shifting urban environment, the individual becomes disorientated, evermore vulnerable to the pernicious influence of the decaying terrain. As the city transmogrifies into progressively complex forms, so the urban subject becomes increasingly disconnected from the landscape, and, as Desiderio notes, their individuality becomes ever more liminal: 'I was a half-breed ghost.'<sup>344</sup>

While perhaps extreme in their portrayals, the above depictions of city life would seem to be part of a larger cultural tradition that is keen to emphasise the symbiotic relationship between the individual and his environment. From Dickens' Artful Dodger to Ellison's eponymous Invisible Man, characters are seen as being both products of the city and as tools formative to its construction. It perhaps follows, then, that any form of crisis within the individual is symptomatic of, and further reflected in, a more general crisis of the city.

### **3.4 Cognitive Social Mapping: The Relocation of the Subject**

The title of McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* is intriguing for a number of reasons, not least because as a semantic unit it fails to function completely. As might be expected from a fiction of the (new) postmodern tradition, the fragmented syntagma, having evidently been released from its original context, playfully opens up the possibility for boundless meaning: 'if nobody speaks of remarkable things'... then, what? What is it to speak of remarkable things? Indeed, what constitutes remarkability, and what happens if nobody speaks of it? Although

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<sup>342</sup> Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1982; London: Penguin, 1994), p.18 [my italics]

<sup>343</sup> Ibid

<sup>344</sup> Ibid, p.19



such questions are important a consideration of the novel, of equal interest is the form that the title takes, and how it might reflect the concerns of the narrative itself.

In a futile attempt to conserve time and limit keyboard strokes, I found myself referring to the novel in its acronymic form, *INSORT*, and was struck by the significance of the emerging word. An amalgamation of ‘insert’ and ‘sort’, the term would seem to reflect the evident tension between the subject and the city, for as will be explicated below, the text demonstrates that the city is never an impartial space into which individuals can be innocently inserted. The city is instead presented as a constant mediating force, impacting upon subjectivity to the extent that inhabitants are constructed, organised and arranged; or rather ‘sorted’. Such a notion is epitomised in the novel by the plight of ‘the man with the carefully trimmed moustache’ and his continuing demands that the council clear the detritus accumulating within his backyard. As his immediate environment slips further into decay, so too, it seems, does his sense of self: ‘My backyard is full of rubbish he says, full, and none of this is mine. I feel I am losing control’ (p.85). Inserted into the urban space, individuality is soon subsumed as the subject takes on characteristics of the landscape, and so effectively dissipates into the environment. Edging ever closer to an existence of zero identity, the man displays an incessant need to reassert his identity, as telephoning the local council later in the day ‘[h]e says I just want you to note that last time you wrote to me my name was spelt incorrectly, because you used an S and not a Z. This is close, but it is not close enough, he says. These things are important, the way you spell a man’s name, it matters, yes?’ (p.131). The irony of this statement is clear, for, as far as the reader is concerned, the man, along with many of the other characters in the text, is nameless. If a character list were to be generated from the text, it would consist largely of visual descriptions of people rather than actual names: ‘the boy with the white shirt’, ‘the short girl with the painted toenails’, ‘the boy with the sore eyes’, ‘the boy with the pierced eyebrow’ and so on. This insistence upon visual markers is clearly important, as the presentation of characters would seem to reflect the nature of encounter within the city, where individuals can be recognised merely through repeated sightings. As Jonathan Raban comments in his metropolitan documentary *Soft City*, ‘[i]n a community of strangers, we need a quick, easy-to-use set of stereotypes, cartoon outlines, with which to

classify the people we encounter.’<sup>345</sup> The concept of ‘insort’ would seem to resonate in this idea; for the individual to successfully establish himself into the community of the city, he needs to sort its inhabitants into easily recognisable types, and the simplest way to achieve this is through visual identifiers. The city, then, ostensibly breeds anonymity; the individual is categorised, made visually recognisable, but never really known.

The novel is intriguing in its decision to allocate names to specific characters and not to others. Although not made explicit in *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, a reading of *So Many Ways to Begin* infers that Kate is both ‘the girl at number twenty-two’ and the first-person narrative voice of the text. For the purpose of this chapter, I have assumed this link to be true. Its acknowledgement, however, provokes an interesting question: namely, why is this link not made explicit, and what significance does it hold? Within the novel, characters that are referred to by name are broadly those who are absent from the city street; such as Sarah, Rob, Simon, Alison and Michael, and thus no longer require a visual label. More significantly as one of ‘the twin boys’ lies dying in the middle of the street, his threatened absence leads to his naming, and thus his affirmation as an individual:

His name is Shahid she says, and the paramedic starts repeating it, shining a light into the dying boy’s eyes, hello Shahid, Shahid can you hear me, hello Shahid?

And behind him, watching, his mother is murmuring his name as well. Shahid, his name is Shahid. His name is Shahid Mohammed Nawaz. His name is Shahid (p.269).

Through the event, the young boy apparently triumphs over the depersonalising impact of the city, as anonymity is eclipsed by identification; he is no longer just ‘one of the twin boys’, but rather Shahid Mohammed Nawaz. As a result of the event, he gains individual significance, and is no longer merely a ‘cartoon outline.’

Interestingly, his fate is not shared by the ‘young man at number eighteen’, who while experiencing the event, and being integral to its immediate aftermath – ‘he was the first to move [...] It was as if he knew what he had to do, as if he’d been

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<sup>345</sup> Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), p.29

waiting for the opportunity' (p.7) – remains a nameless shadow even after his death removes him from the landscape:

In his room, the young man lies on the floor, utterly still. Scattered around him there are broken plates and mugs, a torn poster, curtain hooks. He will stay here for three more days, and it will only be once his brother has telephoned, and banged on the door, and fetched the landlord, that he will be found and taken away (p.273).

Unlike Shahid, the young man remains anonymous, and as such the novel reinforces conceptualisations of the city as a space that fosters amorphous identity and subjective insignificance.

From its opening, however, the text implicitly emphasises the importance of exalting the individual:

The city, it sings. [...]

It's clearest at night, when the sound cuts more sharply across the surface of things, when the song reaches out to a place inside you.

It's a wordless song, for the most, but it's a song all the same, and nobody hearing it could doubt what it sings.

*And the song sings the loudest when you pick out each note*<sup>346</sup> (p.1)

The song is more pertinent when each individual note is realised, yet at the same time the implication is made that each separate note can only function within the context of the song (as with the metaphor of the jigsaw within *England, England*). 'The song reaches out to a place inside you' that individual notes cannot reach. Just as the presence of the note is validated only within the song, so the individual gains significance only within the wider context of the city. The anthropomorphic portrayal of the city presented in the prefatorial section, further emphasises the symbiotic relationship between the space and the subject. The collective thrum generated by inhabitants provides the city with a respiratory rhythm, with brief 'silences, like a falter between heartbeats' (p.3), broken by 'a slamming door, a car alarm, a thin drift of music from half a mile away' (p.5), and so the city moves on. Moreover, as

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<sup>346</sup> My italics

suggested by the opening quote to this section, once the city starts moving again, life becomes complicated. Indeed, how can the individual locate himself within a space that is constantly fluctuating? How can the note be validated if the song is continually changing?

One potential way that the text implies self-validation can occur is through the individual constructing an image of the immediate environment and then locating himself within it; or rather, drawing on the ideas of ‘insort’, sorting the changing unknowable totality into something knowable, and then inserting oneself into it. A salient example of this process in action occurs with the encounter of the student outside number eleven and the young girl from number nineteen.

Working on a detailed picture of the street, the student, evidently keen to impress his tutor with an architecturally sound image, strives to produce a graphic representation that is both technically sound and empirically accurate: ‘He begins to measure the widths of the houses, squinting along the length of his arm, looking for the correct proportions. [...] He measures the distances between the ridges and the eaves, calculating the angles’ (pp.58-59). The young girl, curiously watching the image take form, fails to recognise the skeletal sketch as representative of the street, despite its architectural accuracy. Absent from the student’s depiction are the markers that she requires to sort the environment into something knowable: ‘where are the windows, she says, in a very still and quiet voice. [...] Where is the dog she says in the same voice’ (p.59). For the young girl, urban, and indeed architectural accuracy are irrelevant; rather the image is formed through subjective experience, and thus must above all possess social resonance. This is a point evidently shared by the young man as he muses upon how to represent the complex history of the houses before him: ‘he looks from the page to the building, he sighs and pulls at the loose skin around the corners of his forehead, it is very difficult he is thinking’ (p.60). Only through a rendering that evokes such resonance can the image be recognised as representative of the street; the sketch could otherwise be a depiction of any row of houses on any street. A similar process can be seen to be at work when Kate recalls ‘the event’ of the summer, and through arranging – or sorting – the scene, locates her position to it:

I don't remember seeing it, not the actual moment itself, I remember strange details, peripheral images, small things that happened away from the blinded centre. [...]

There was a woman leaning out of a high window, shaking a blanket.

There were some boys over the road having a barbeque, pushing a knife into the meat to see if it was cooked.

There was a man with a long beard, up a ladder at number twenty-five, painting his windowframes, he'd been there all day and he'd almost finished (p.8).

The processes of validating conceptions of the self through locating the individual spatially, are seemingly aligned with the (postmodern) theories of cognitive mapping as explored by Kevin Lynch and Fredric Jameson in their respective studies *The Image of the City* and *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Evaluating the importance of possessing knowledge of one's immediate environment, Lynch conducts surveys with the inhabitants of three cities (Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles), and from his findings surmises that 'a distinctive and legible environment not only offers security but also heightens the potential depth and experience of human emotion.'<sup>347</sup> Indeed, he contends that the subject's ability to map his location within the constantly evolving urban space – for the individual should have 'the power to change that image to fit changing needs'<sup>348</sup> – is to fight against the omnipresent fate that the city seems to offer its inhabitants: that of urban and social disorientation. The argument follows that to know one's environment, and thus one's position to it, one can know oneself:

A good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security. He can establish an harmonious relationship between himself and the outside world. This is the obverse of the fear that comes with disorientation; it means that the sweet sense of home is strongest when home is not only familiar but distinctive as well.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960), p.5

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid*, p.6

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid*, pp.4-5

Drawing on the work of Lynch, Jameson proposes that the threat to subjectivity posed by spatial disorientation is symptomatic of the period of postmodernity. Illustrating his argument with an analysis of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, Jameson puts forward the idea that a mutation in space has occurred which has not yet been matched by a similar transformation in the subject. As a microcosmic encapsulation of the city (Jameson comments on how it ‘aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city’<sup>350</sup>), the Bonaventure imposes disorientation on all those who enter; the four towers which constitute the building are entirely symmetrical and the lobby space, which extends to all six tiers of the hotel, is devoid of any directional signs. As a result, this new ‘postmodern hyperspace’ has, for Jameson, ‘succeeded in transcending the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.’<sup>351</sup> Similarly, in the constantly shifting space of the city, orientation is problematic, and this is perhaps metaphorically represented in the problem the boy at number eighteen has with his eyes: ‘It’s the light that makes his eyes hurt, mostly, bright or sudden light, and the dust in the air. [...] It’s worse in the city, with all the dust and the dirt’ (pp.31-32). The city, then, can be seen to impair the senses, making orientation all the more problematic. While a possible remedy for the alienation of the subject materialises in the practice of cognitive mapping, one clear problem remains: namely, how to produce a coherent image of an environment that is ever more shifting and fluid.

As suggested above, the practice of cognitive mapping must be understood as an entirely subjective process. On producing his own mental image, the individual is able to locate himself within a given environment despite his ‘map’ perhaps being entirely unrecognisable to a fellow inhabitant. Indeed, Lynch concludes:

The city is not built for one person, but for great numbers of people, of widely varying backgrounds, temperaments, occupations and class. Our analyses indicate a substantial variation in the way different people organize their city, in what elements they most depend on, or in what form qualities are most congenial to them.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.40

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid*, p.44

<sup>352</sup> Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960), p.110

The cognitive map produced by an individual, then, will not necessarily take the form of a typical cartographic model, but rather will be determined by those aspects of the environment that are most salient to the subject's everyday experience. While this idea is reflected in the text, specifically in the quoted example of the student and the young girl, the novel implies the need to go beyond the models of cognitive mapping as outlined by Lynch and Jameson.

Rather than creating a map that locates the individual spatially to the environment, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* emphasises the importance of *social* location. As demonstrated by the text, however, such a process is clearly problematic to the city dweller, whose existence is characterised by transience: 'people were slipping out of the city unexpectedly, like children getting lost in a crowd, leaving nothing but temporary addresses and promises to keep in touch' (p.37). The city emerges as a space that breeds anonymity. Any relationships that are made appear to be only temporary and, as Kate discovers, once connections are broken, it is almost impossible to re-establish them: 'I live in a different city now I say, it's difficult to see people so often' (p.80). Despite this, or perhaps as a result of this, the desire to forge relationships remains strong: 'Once a month, maybe less, one of us will call the other and we'll say oh hi it's been ages we should try and meet up, and a plan will be made, and cancelled, or not quite made at all' (p.21). From the clubs in the centre with 'the dancefloors sticky and sore from a night's pounding' (p.4), to the 'man with tired hands watch[ing] a young couple dance in the carpark of his restaurant' (p.6), the importance of connecting socially is made explicit throughout the narrative. Indeed, it might be argued that through interacting with others, and thus acquiring a knowledge of those within the immediate social sphere, the individual is able to establish, and have verified, a sense of self.

The characters in the novel that appear to be most content, that is, those individuals who have a strong sense of selfhood, are those rooted firmly within a specific social network; or rather, those individuals who are able to locate their position within the larger social structure. The equanimity of the group of students at number seventeen is affirmed when, in the back bedroom, they allow themselves both collective and individual contemplation: 'they think about daytime things for a moment, about rolling hills, or beaches, or playing football, or whatever it is they've learnt to think about at these times, and they breathe slowly and move for a moment into a kind of waking sleep.' The collective dynamic confirmed, the group is able to

temporarily disband with the ‘girl with the boots’ declaring ‘I’m going home, I want to go home now’ (p.17). Her position within the collective confirmed, and thus her sense of self-reaffirmed, the girl has no immediate further use for the group. This passage, emphasising the tranquil collectivity of the group is, however, immediately proceeded by its antithesis: the young man at number eighteen waking up in an empty room’ surrounded by the chaotic mess that he needs to *sort*, pack tidy and arrange (p.18). Furthermore, apparently now alone in an ‘endless city’ (p.21), Kate is able to access a sense of self-awareness only through reminiscing on her student days, where her interaction within a specific social network validated her existence. Now (socially) disorientated within a new city, all that remains is a bittersweet nostalgia: ‘I tried to remember what it was like to be near so many people who knew me’ (p.23).

The desire, experienced by the characters in the novel to connect with others, corroborates Raban’s assertion of the urban dweller’s inevitable desire to connect. It is no surprise, he argues, that ‘making connection should become such a central obsession in the life of big cities. To meet and hold on to other people is to fly in the face of what the city threatens to do to us; when isolation and loss are so casual and likely, we have to work as hard as novelists to keep our society going, to keep in touch.<sup>353</sup> As an individual existing outside of any specific social group, the idea of obsessional networking is perhaps most evident in the behaviour of the boy at number eighteen, whose desire to connect leads to an over-inflated sense of significance being apportioned to events, such as his encounter with Kate at a party:

They talked a lot, and laughed, and poured each other drinks and he’d felt comfortable and good and real with her, and she’d touched his arm once or twice, and looked him in the eye without saying anything, and although they hadn’t kissed he thinks probably they could have done. [...] And just before she went inside he said, very quickly, do you want to go out sometime, for a drink or something or? And she’d grinned a big squint-eyed grin and said yes yes, Wednesday night, I’ll come round Wednesday night and we’ll go somewhere and then she’d gone in and closed the door and he’d gone home and barely slept until dawn (pp.55-56).

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<sup>353</sup> Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*, pp.133-134



The event, for Kate, holds little significance, to the extent that, as a later conversation with Michael (the boy at number eighteen's brother) demonstrates, the encounter is entirely forgotten:

I say he sounds interesting, it's a shame I didn't get to talk to him more.

He says but you did, at that party [...]

He says that there was a party you both went to, he told me about it, you spent the evening talking to each other, he walked you home and then you were so drunk you forgot about it.

No I say, no I don't remember that, and I think and I try and remember, no I say, I really don't remember (p.154).

For the young man at number eighteen, having experienced social connection and the inflated sense of self that comes with it ('he'd felt comfortable and good and real with her'), the banal incident is metamorphosed into a seminal event with life-altering potential; the initial connection pre-empting him to plan a future: 'weeks or months after this first night became a reference point' (p.88).

For the young man, the encounter is significant precisely because the connection made serves to locate him within the larger social structure. Already integrated within her own group, for Kate, the event has little significance, but for the young man, it is 'remarkable', since it seemingly offers him a possible reprieve from the anonymous existence imposed by the city. Indeed, despite his occasional protestations of love, the young man recognises that his need to connect is based upon something more than friendship, for 'he wonders [...] why he thinks about her so much when he knows so little to think about' (p.89). Rather, through establishing a social connection with Kate, the young man is able to locate his sense of self and so become 'real'.

This idea of defining the self through others is clearly not unique to McGregor's novel, but as we have seen is explicated within much contemporary fiction that seeks to explore the banal meaningless of postmodern subjectivity. Such a notion is further explored by Jean-Paul Sartre, who in reflecting upon the nature of self-validation, contends that 'what I constantly aim at across my experiences are the Other's feelings, the Other's ideas, the Other's volitions, the Other's character. This

is because the Other is not only the one whom I see but the one who sees me.<sup>354</sup> Such a conceptualisation of identity is, however, undeniably problematic, not least because the creation of a semi-communal living space, as encapsulated by the street featured in *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, does not necessarily culminate in the development of community spirit. Certainly, the potential of such a practice is clearly undermined by the young man at number eighteen's comment on the back of a photograph: 'there are so many people in the world [...] and I want to know them all but I don't even know my next-door-neighbour's name' (p.216).

As a novel of speculation, the narrative and forms of characterisation provoke reflections upon the nature of individual and collective identity: what hope is there for establishing social connections within the wider community when those who are (spatially) closest remain anonymous? To what extent, then, is 'species consciousness' an achievable objective within the contemporary moment?<sup>355</sup> Moreover, despite being set within a neighbourhood, the novel implies that such 'communal' environments seem rather to foster a sense of isolation, where residents are ostensibly enclosed within specific social or familial groups, determined primarily by the four walls of their home. The urban space that McGregor depicts within the narrative clearly has much in common with the fragmented postmodern landscape. His depiction of a neighbourhood where individuals form small social cliques rather than collectively uniting as a unified community, might be interpreted as the urban manifestation of Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern age. Within a landscape that seemingly fosters alienation, self- and social-validation remain elusive yearnings: it is, it seems, still 'the future' rather than 'the present' which belongs to crowds.

### 3.5 Cataloguing the Self: Urban Archiving

There were, I knew, people who organised such things into files and folders, catalogued hundreds of examples of their kids' schoolwork and paintings, created veritable museums. I envied them – envied them for their faith in that

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<sup>354</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2000), p.228

<sup>355</sup> In exploring the implications of cosmopolitan identities, such concerns will be explored more significantly within the conclusion to this study.

future day when one might pull down albums and scrapbooks and in the space of an afternoon repossess one's life.<sup>356</sup>

*If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, and specifically the actions of the young man at number eighteen, suggest, however, a further potential remedy to counter the social disorientation of the contemporary subject: urban archiving. Arranging his possessions prior to his intended leaving, the collection of photographs belonging to the young man at number eighteen amass into a vast storyboard, detailing the complex plot of urban life (pp.29-30). Through the photographic rendering of the city and its inhabitants, the young man is able to construct a socially informed image of his environment, or rather a 'virtual city,' into which he can usefully locate himself. Ostensibly unable to connect on a 'real' social level, the photographic medium may go some way to resolve the problems experienced by the young man; for if, as I have argued, the capacity to locate oneself, both spatially and socially, is significantly hindered by the transience of the urban environment, the very nature of the photograph – that is, the capacity to capture, and thus eternalise specific moments – allows for a level of permanence not otherwise possible. Rather than relying upon social cognitive mapping (and its insistence upon sociability) to remedy the anonymity and disorientation of the city dweller, the individual can instead use and manipulate images of the environment to provoke a similar effect.

On awaking, the young man 'picks up a camera and takes photographs of the morning, the two people in the street, the sunlight, the closed curtains of the window opposite' (p.18), before 'he turns on the television and picks up a polaroid camera. As soon as the screen warms up he takes a photograph of it, scribbling the time and date on the back of the black printout, seven a.m., thirty-one, oh eight, ninety-seven' (p.28), and then 'he picks up the camera again and carries it through to the bathroom [and] takes a picture of himself in the mirror' (p.30). Through documenting his day in such a rigorous fashion, the young man is presented with material confirmation of his existence:

In the bathroom of number eighteen, a face looks out from the Polaroid, wide-eyed, composed. A young man, early twenties, a smooth round face, straight nose, full lips, pale hair losing thickness around the temples, a buckle

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<sup>356</sup> Joseph O'Neill, *Netherland*, p.125

of skin folded below each eye. It's a good picture, and in a moment he will date it and place it with the other objects he has collected together on his bedroom floor (p.31).

Interestingly, the above account is the only real visual description of character featured within the narrative. While experiences and memories may over time elude us, the photographic image has the potential to document more permanently our individual lives. As Debord suggests in *The Society of the Spectacle*, 'for one to whom the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings.'<sup>357</sup> Such would appear to be the case with the young man, whose obsessional photographic documenting enables him to access reality, and subsequently to reaffirm his relation to it.

Similarly, surveying the empty upstairs flat of number twenty, the narrative voice directs the reader towards a dresser where the photographs displayed amongst the scattered paraphernalia of bourgeois living ('decorative teapots' and 'royal doulton figurines') present a 'life-story waltzing across the varnished wood' (p.127). Life here is again seen as fleeting and as something that requires material signifiers to record, and thus validate it. Moreover, Kate's apparent need to turn to her photographs to alleviate the city-induced solitude of her current existence would further seem to attest to the importance of the image. It is, however, at such a moment that the status of the photograph as purveyor of 'reality' begins to deconstruct.

Anxious about the prospect of telling her mother of her pregnancy, Kate is momentarily drawn to a series of photographs of a past summer spent with friends, and is struck by how 'important the pictures felt, like vital documents that should be kept in a fireproof tin instead of being blu-tacked and pinned to the wall.' As documents of 'the most significant part of [her] life' (p.38), Kate's anxiety is quickly replaced by a welcome sense of nostalgia as she recalls her interaction within the events captured. Her nostalgia is clearly double-edged, however, as studying one particular photograph, she concludes that the subjects depicted are 'already looking like ghosts.' The subjects captured are referred to as spectral-like figures precisely because the images do not serve to depict their presence, but rather suggest the presence of their absence. Kate's assertion seemingly implies that photographs,

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<sup>357</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1994; New York: Zone Books, 1999), p.18

rather than reflecting reality, instead represent the absence of reality; or rather, the deferral of the presence of reality. A reliance on the photographic image to represent reality emerges, then, as intensely problematic.<sup>358</sup>

The significance of the photograph as a means to document the past is similarly explored in *So Many Ways to Begin*, where the camera is used as a tool to render the present, and subsequently the past, 'real'. Using a portion of his redundancy money, David, a former museum curator, purchases a video camera 'so he could pin [Kate] down on tape before she'd gone. Because even when she was still thirteen, fourteen, he could imagine all too easily sitting in a quiet and empty house after she'd left [...] wishing he could picture more clearly the times they'd spent together when she'd still been at home.'<sup>359</sup> Moreover, recollecting his wedding day, David comments 'I kept wanting to stop and take pictures [...] I just wanted to stand still and watch and not have anyone say anything to me for a moment because I was worried it was all passing me by.' As a means to document events, the photograph is clearly useful; yet its efficiency is immediately undermined by David's acknowledgement that 'the photos they ended up with, mostly taken outside the registry office and stuck into a slim red album, didn't seem quite enough. He wanted more' (p.146). The totality of the event, then, cannot be captured with a single image or collection of images – just as such works of speculative fiction do not depict a totalising reality, but rather narrow their focus to allow for introspection – and as such the memories evoked from the photograph will always be unreliably subjective. Furthermore, the novel demonstrates the manner in which photographs evoke a false sense of reality. Indeed, the collection of photographs gathered by David to document his life serve to record a past that is essentially a complete fabrication. Rather than representing reality they in fact function to conceal the 'truth' of his existence; that, as revealed to him by his mother's ailing friend, he was adopted.

The occasion of Kate's eighth birthday party further problematises the reliability of the photograph, as the camera, in capturing a snapshot of the event, is

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<sup>358</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the figures are 'already looking like ghosts' affirms their presence within a past, but also, through evoking a romanticised memory of that past – 'I remembered coming back from the garage at midnight, armed with fresh supplies and seeing my friends' faces lit up by the shine of the television' (p.40) – Kate's response to the images provoke questions relating to the mimetic reliability of photographs. Moreover, as a cognitive process, memory is profoundly unreliable. When studying a photograph, then, the image is filtered through subjective recollection, thereby varying degrees of significance are attributed to the same event and multiple 'realities' are constructed.

<sup>359</sup> Jon McGregor, *So Many Ways to Begin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p.295

used to momentarily disperse underlying tension and create the façade of family union. Thus, the text would again seem to suggest that as a tool that enables social and familial cohesion, the camera produces a *false* sense of reality. In this sense, borrowing from Althusser, it might be suggested that photographs, rather than offering a depiction of reality, instead serve to capture ‘the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.’<sup>360</sup> In creating family snapshots, David affirms his position within a specific group, and thus his identity within that group is confirmed. Similarly, in photographing his immediate social environment, the young man at number eighteen fabricates his relationship to his ‘real condition of existence.’ This is perhaps why the photograph remains crucial to the contemporary subject. Its reliability as a purveyor of reality is fundamentally irrelevant; rather its significance lies in its ability to locate the individual by telling stories.

Not dissimilar to the photograph, the objects that the individual possesses might usefully be considered as the material encapsulation of the stories they tell. Certainly, throughout *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* characters, through acknowledging the ephemerality of existence, recognise the importance of leaving material traces of their presence. Thinking back to her last days on the street, Kate recalls, ‘I wanted to leave a note for the next tenant, leave a trace of myself behind, I wanted to be able to go back years later and find a plaque with my name on it screwed to the wall’ (p.65). Furthermore, following her housemate Simon’s departure, she reflects that his ‘room has a hardness in it without his things there, an emptiness that made me want to close the door, leave a do not disturb sign outside, let the dust settle’ (p.64). In the absence of his possessions, Simon’s room subsequently reverts back to ‘the empty back bedroom of number twenty-two’ (p.87), leaving no trace of his ever being present. Kate’s apprehension about packing her own possessions away<sup>361</sup> and the young man at number eighteen’s similar felt anxiety – ‘he is reluctant to vanish without a trace’ (p.57) – would seem to make explicit the significance of the object to the formation and validation of identity. Certainly, this notion would seem to be the premise for the latter’s concept of urban archiving.

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<sup>360</sup> Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation’, p.109

<sup>361</sup> Kate recalls being overwhelmed at the task ahead of her: ‘I remembered looking at my overflowing room, and the empty boxes, and not knowing where to begin’ (p.64). Later in the narrative, ‘she thinks about her own room, overcrowded with clothes and books and tapes and all the dozens of bits and pieces that don’t seem to belong anywhere but can’t quite be thrown away, she wonders where to start’ (p.87)

In addition to a collection of photographs, the archive of urban life formed by the young man at number eighteen also comprises a number of seemingly banal objects:

A page from a TV guide. An empty cigarette packet. A series of supermarket till receipts, stapled together in chronological sequence. Leaflets advertising bhangra all-dayers and techno all-nighters. Train tickets. Death notices cut from local newspapers. An unopened packet of chewing gum.

He lays them all out on the floor, lays them out in size order, rearranges them in date order, blinking quickly. He stands back and looks, and writes out a list of the objects in front of him (p.28).

Again notions of ‘sorting’ emerge as significant; through organising the materials of the present into a manageable order, an understanding of the self might be enabled. This is an idea further explored in *So Many Ways to Begin*, where the practice of archiving serves to reveal the historical ‘truth’ of individual existence. On recalling a number of visits to eminent museums, David reflects:

It was this that he had spent most of his life looking for: these physical traces of history, these objects which could weigh his hands down with their density of memory and time. Something he could hold on to and say, look, this belonged to my father and forefathers, this is some small piece of who they were. This is some small piece of where I began (p.34).

Tracing an object’s history, then, and additionally placing it within the present, might usefully enable the construction of an individual’s biography. As Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall note in their essay ‘The Cultural Biography of Things’, ‘a person is ultimately composed of all the objects they have made and transacted and these objects represent the sum total of their agency.’<sup>362</sup> This idea is usefully encapsulated in the significance of a small clay figure to the young man at number eighteen.

The figure is a *Mizuko Jizô* statue, a commemorative icon commonly found in Japanese temples to memorialise infants who have died either before birth or in the formative years of their life. As depicted in the postcard belonging to the young man,

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<sup>362</sup> Chris Gosden & Yvonne Marshall, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things’ in *World Archaeology*, Vol.31, No.2 (October, 1999), p.173

while the hillside contains a great number of the figures, each individual statue, having been personalised by grieving parents, is distinct in appearance. The *Jizô* is of interest to the young man precisely because it encapsulates the desire to negate the alienation of the human condition and the anonymity of contemporary subjectivity: ‘he turns over the postcard, to remind himself of what he always thinks when he looks at this picture, he reads the words he wrote when he first saw it, the words in thick black ink, they are all named it says, each one of them has a name’ (p.74). The absence of each lost child is marked by the presence of its respective statue, and as such, its individual existence is affirmed. The status of the figure as a potential icon to alleviate social disorientation is, however, problematic for the object in the young man’s possession is confirmed as a ‘replica’ (p.73). Far from being an iconographic memorial, then, the figure instead emerges as an empty commodity targeted towards eager tourists. Indeed, the *Jizô* might be thought of as epitomising late capitalist consumer culture where, as Baudrillard contends, ‘objects shine in a sort of hyperresemblance [...] that makes it so that they no longer resemble anything, except the empty figure of resemblance, the empty form of representation.’<sup>363</sup> It might be argued that the resonance of a material object is fundamentally self-defined, since if items resemble nothing but ‘the empty form of representation’, then it follows that they are ostensibly open to any conceivable meaning, rendering them ultimately meaningless. Hence, while a pile of shattered glass may be discarded as waste by some, for the ‘archaeologist of the present’ it represents a valuable find of ‘urban diamonds’ (p.153). Similarly, the objects revered in *So Many Ways to Begin* possess a resonance not determined by their material value, but rather from their potential to evoke memories: contemplating the tale behind a photograph of his father, David comments that ‘it was a story [Susan] liked to tell; it made her feel a part of something bigger than herself’ (p.19).

In a society where there is ‘too much of everything, too much stuff, too many places, too much information, too many people, too much of things for there to be too much of’ (p.216), perhaps urban archiving offers a solution to the disorientation of the individual. For the organisation of the ‘empty figure[s] of resemblance’ into something which evoke meaning and resonance may serve to reveal something not only about the individual, but also society more generally.

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<sup>363</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.45



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The manner in which such novels as explored here gesture towards the need for species consciousness while simultaneously emphasising the unattainability of such a philosophy, destabilises the myth of 9/11. Such texts are anticipatory in the manner in which *Mao II* is, and thus infer that the intensified call for species consciousness as witnessed within the post-9/11 moment is precisely that: an intensification of already-existing concerns. As Leonard makes clear in *Glisten*, contemporary society remains so fundamentally fragmented, that the achievement of a unified collective consciousness remains a utopian fantasy. Moreover, with the events of 9/11 seemingly inciting a profound cultural rift that reinvigorates Orientalist discourse, and ostensibly corroborates Samuel P. Huntington's hypothesis of a clash of civilizations,<sup>364</sup> species consciousness itself remains elusively mythological.

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<sup>364</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996; London: Touchstone Books, 1998)

## 4. ‘Chimerical Monstrous Others’? The Representation of the Muslim in the Post-9/11 Novel

### 4.1 The Reluctant Ostraciser and the Fundamentalist

In an article published in *The Independent* in October 2006, Mohsin Hamid recalls a tube journey taken some four months previously<sup>365</sup>. He recounts how on boarding the train in London on a unseasonably hot day in June (‘hot enough to remind me of Lahore’) he is taken aback when, on entering a crowded carriage containing a number of standing commuters, he observes a single unoccupied seat. His sense of bewilderment, however, soon turns to disgruntlement, as a secondary glance explains the reason for the vacant space:

I noticed the fellow in the next seat over. He was, I guessed, of Pakistani origin, with intense eyes, a prayer cap, a loose kurta, and the kind of moustache-less beard that tabloids associate with Muslim fundamentalists. [...] Look at this racial profiling, I thought to myself. Here’s this fellow, perfectly harmless, and everyone’s staying clear like he’s planning to kill them. And then they wonder why Muslims in Britain feel ostracised.

Keen to demonstrate to the passengers the irrationality behind their misplaced anxieties, Hamid takes the empty seat and, in bestowing the targeted passenger with a smile that translates as ‘Hello there brother, we’re on the same side’, seeks to forge an empathetic allegiance with him. The faux incredulity encapsulated by the expression situates both as subjects of the suspicious Western gaze, and thus serves to expose the inherent bigotry behind his fellow travellers’ assumptions.

Having sought to prove his point however, Hamid’s ethical ascendancy is quickly undermined as he too resorts to racial profiling. He recalls how, as the doors close and the tube judders forward (thus sealing the fate of the passengers), the tension within the carriage intensifies, as on observing the front cover of Hamid’s copy of *The Economist* (which contains the image of a Jordanian militant, recently killed in Iraq),

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<sup>365</sup> Mohsin Hamid, ‘Down the Tube’ in *Independent* (October 8, 2006)  
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/mohsin-hamid-down-the-tube-418957.html>>  
(accessed 20.11.09)

the passenger segregates himself further by demanding to know of his now captive audience why it is that ‘Arabs get all the credit.’ Marrying together the increasingly erratic behaviour of the accused passenger with his resemblance to the oft-repeated image of the Muslim fundamentalist paraded by the Western media, Hamid’s frustration at the prejudice shown by his fellow passengers quickly turns to complicity. As his journey progresses, so the assumed bond between him and the suspected Islamic terrorist (the transition, in Hamid’s mind, from his being perceived as a victimised ‘brother’ to a fully-blown religious fanatic is near instantaneous) becomes more strained. Indeed, rather than an empathetic bond forged by a shared sense of social injustice, the connection that Hamid seeks to reassert is increasingly determined by necessity.

In trying to appease the passenger’s rage at the assumed injustice done to him and his religion by Western culture, he attempts to establish a rapport with him, rationalising that ‘he might be less likely to blow himself to smithereens if he knew he was sitting next to another Muslim.’ Realising the proximity of the date to the anniversary of the 7/7 bombings however (‘didn’t terrorists have a thing about anniversaries?’), Hamid grows increasingly tense, with every scrutinised move made by the accused triggering a sequence of imagined scenarios in his mind depicting how he might outwit the fundamentalist - any doubt over the fellow’s identity has, by this point, been dismissed – and so avert the potential terrorist attack. As the account reaches its dénouement and the train begins to decelerate as it enters the station, Hamid observes how, ‘James Bond-like’, the terrorist glances at his watch. The time is ‘five o’clock. And not just five o’clock. Exactly, to the second, five o’clock.’ For Hamid, the alignment of all the precursory components (the presence of an openly hostile Islamic radical with a suspicious ‘bulge under his kurta’; a crowded tube carriage; the impending anniversary of the 7/7 bombings; the precision timing), suggests that the ensuing terrorist attack is inevitable. On exiting the carriage alongside the suspected terrorist, who he endows with the dubious accolade of ‘the most suspicious person [...] ever seen in my life’, Hamid is, however, taken aback somewhat when the envisaged act of terrorism fails to materialise. On exiting the station, he recounts his journey to a friend visiting from Pakistan who, in concluding that Hamid has ‘been living here too long’, diagnoses paranoia.

Hamid’s anecdote, although undercut with a knowing irony, constitutes one of the many narratives that collectively form a cogent argument suggesting the

emergence of a more complex politics of identity for Muslims following the events of September 11. As discussed in a previous chapter, the heightened sense of anxiety that is often attributed to the post-9/11 landscape often manifests itself, as shown in David Mitchell's short-story 'Dénouement', in the, often unintentional, vilification of the Muslim. Certainly, Graham Nixon's assurance, prior to identifying two potential fundamentalists, that "racist" was one thing I was never called,<sup>366</sup> is paralleled in Hamid's account by his simultaneous condemnation of, and reliance upon, the reductive practice of 'racial profiling'. Such texts, and the inherent contradictions that they contain, suggest that the reluctant ostracisation of the Muslim is an undesirable, but nonetheless inevitable, symptom of a paranoid post-9/11 culture.

That such heightened vilification is specific to the post-9/11 landscape is, however, debateable and thus in this chapter I consider the representation of the Muslim within contemporary British fiction as a means to explore the extent to which the post-9/11 mythologizing of the Muslim as cultural Other might rather be perceived as a reinvigoration of already existing pre-9/11 concerns. Indeed, as I will go on to demonstrate, an overview of British fiction published within the last fifteen years indicates a clear continuity of theme and style that transcend the assumed cultural schism precipitated by the events of September 11. I refer to a range of texts spanning from 1995 to 2009, looking specifically at the following, which are broadly representative of the wider contemporary structure of feeling: Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* (1995) and *My Son the Fanatic* (1998), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Martin Amis's 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' (2006) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Such a review, while highlighting clear parallels between pre- and post-9/11 representations of the Muslim does, however, simultaneously reveal an increase in both instances of fundamentalist characters within texts, and the intensity in which they are depicted. As I will go on to show, the character of the Islamic fanatic is not unique to the post-9/11 novel, yet the inclusion of such figures in recent fiction brings with it an increased potency; and whereas Islamic radicals were depicted previously as characters lurking at the margins of society, and indeed at the periphery of the narrative, following the events of September 11, the fundamentalist features more prominently within British (and American) fiction, and emerges as less of a stock character, and more of a complex

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<sup>366</sup> David Mitchell, 'Dénouement' in *Guardian* (May 26, 2007)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/26/originalwriting.fiction>> (accessed 06.07.07)

figure that demands cultural analysis. It is perhaps unsurprising that, in an environment where the image of militant Islam has a heightened currency, the character of the Islamic radical features more prevalently within novels published after 9/11; yet to what extent might the increased presence of the fundamentalist within fiction amount to a general shift in cultural mood?

Depictions of the fundamentalist within recent British fiction broadly adhere to seven types: the disaffected Muslim youth turning to radical Islam as a means to assert a coherent identity (*The Black Album*'s Chad, *White Teeth*'s Millat); the disgruntled British-Muslim seeking to reclaim the purity of Islam from the corrupting forces of the West (*The Black Album*'s Riaz); the second- or third-generation migrant seeking to reclaim a lost past from which they are entirely disconnected (*My Son the Fanatic*'s Farid, *Brick Lane*'s Karim); the aggrieved individual seeking revenge for a personal tragedy (*Shalimar the Clown*'s eponymous protagonist); 'real' fundamentalists ('The Last Days of Muhammad Atta'); the clichéd naïve young Muslim vulnerable to inculcation by a predatory Islamic radical (*A Week in December*'s Hassan); and the ambiguous fundamentalist (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*'s Changez). In the discussion that follows I will offer analyses that, in considering the portrayal of the Muslim within contemporary fiction, will both highlight the continuity of these and other tropes in pre- and post-9/11 literature, and expose any differences.

## 4.2 Tracing the Post-Migrant Tradition

T.S. Eliot argues in his seminal essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' that 'no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.'<sup>367</sup> Eliot seeks to readdress the seldom-acknowledged significance of 'tradition' within English criticism, arguing that literary value is too frequently determined by the extent to which texts are deemed original: 'we dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed.' Rather than defining literary value by the degree to which an author deviates from tradition, however, he suggests that 'we shall often find that not

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<sup>367</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* 6<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Methuen & Co, 1948), p.49

only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.<sup>368</sup> For Eliot, then, literature exists within a continually shifting tradition, whereby ‘new’ authors constantly reuse and reinterpret the styles, tropes and motifs of their predecessors, and in so doing both reflect and redefine the tradition. Crucial to his argument is the notion of a historical sense which prompts authors to acknowledge the nuances of the past tradition when creating new works; he contends that ‘the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.’<sup>369</sup> For Eliot, the aesthetic value of the text, and paradoxically its individuality, are located in those instances where the author has submitted to the voices and sentiments of past writers, and as such, writing is seen as a process of self-sacrifice, where individual personality is renounced and tradition embraced:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. [...] And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.<sup>370</sup>

In tracing the portrayals of the Muslim and the Islamic fundamentalist within contemporary literature, Eliot’s theories of tradition carry an increased resonance. Certainly, as proposed above, in interrogating claims of a marked shift in representation following 9/11, an analysis of fiction published within the last fifteen years demonstrates a continuation of concerns in the pre- and post-9/11 landscape, which is suggestive of an established and evolving post-migrant tradition. Borrowing from Bradford’s conception of the ‘New Postmodernists,’ as outlined in Chapter 1, we might argue that examples of recent British fiction are indicative of an emergent ‘New Post-Migrant Tradition’. Just as Bradford suggests that the new postmodernists ‘have become complicit with the cultural fabric which most would perceive as contemptible’

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid, p.48

<sup>369</sup> Ibid, p.49

<sup>370</sup> Ibid, pp.58-59

as ‘their radicalism tends to be attuned to the demands of the marketplace,’<sup>371</sup> so too authors aligned with the new post-migrant tradition draw upon and playfully exploit the characteristics manifested in the texts of their literary predecessors, effectively transforming the post-migrant experience into a marketable commodity. Tracing representations of the migrant in Western literature, the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) emerges as a watershed moment in the fictional portrayal, and reception of, migrant experience; indeed, as I will suggest, the furore surrounding its publication might be conceived as a moment of cultural transition, engendering the new post-migrant tradition.

#### 4.2.1 The Post-Migrant Tradition

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.<sup>372</sup>

Published in 1952, Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* emerged during a period of great social transition within America,<sup>373</sup> and reflects the inherent difficulties in constructing coherent post-migrant subjectivities. The narrative follows, and is narrated by, an unnamed African-American as he struggles to establish, and have socially validated, a stable identity. Commencing from a South still struggling with

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<sup>371</sup> Bradford, Richard. *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p.48 See also Graham Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), a study which explores the apparent commodification of postcolonialism within contemporary Western culture.

<sup>372</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p.3

<sup>373</sup> During the same year, an Immigration and Nationality Act would be passed, declaring that ‘the right of a person to become a naturalized citizen of the United States shall not be denied or abridged because of race.’ Two years later would see the Supreme Court ruling, in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, that segregation within public schools was ‘unconstitutional’; and 1954 would see Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger, ultimately leading, following her arrest, to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, of which Martin Luther King, Jr, would be instrumental.

the effects of slavery, the novel records the maturation of the Invisible Man, while chronicling his perpetual subjection to the Western ideologies that serve to stymie the development of his identity. A retrospective narrative, the novel concludes as it begins, with the protagonist escaping his overdetermined identity by confining himself to a Harlem sewer.

The novel, while broadly written within the American tradition, establishes a defining characteristic of migrant identity that is echoed throughout British post-migrant literature: namely, the liminality of migrant experience. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist remains anonymous, and despite being continually subjected to the interpellating processes of Western ideology, his inherent invisibility ensures that his identity within American society essentially remains unvalidated. As the narrative progresses, the protagonist's perception of his social invisibility shifts from a sense of anxiety to him embracing his transience:

[M]y problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an *invisible* man (p.573).

Crucially, however, the Invisible Man refuses to be deluded into believing that his pursuit for a positive identity, that transcends the repressive ideologies of Western society, has been successful, and thus the novel reinforces the perpetual, and problematic, shifting of migrant identity. Certainly, as the novel concludes, the protagonist accepts that any remittance from ideological subjection will be only fleeting, commenting that 'There seems to be no escape. Here I've set out to throw my anger into the world's face, but now that I've tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I'm drawn up again' (p.579). Key to the Invisible Man's shifting identity, then, is the sense of cultural dislocation; the omnipresent lure of taking on different 'roles' is essentially derived from the protagonist's need to belong in a society that refuses to validate his existence.

The sense of dislocation, of the impossibility of 'effortlessly' belonging that defines the Invisible Man's identity, is characteristic of earlier postcolonial polemics, of which W.E.B. Du Bois' treatise *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is representative. Exploring the politics of African-American identities at the turn of the twentieth



century, Du Bois situates 'double-consciousness' as a defining characteristic. He argues that, for the African-American, 'one ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.'<sup>374</sup> For Du Bois, and later reflected in Ellison's novel, migrant identity is characterised by an essential duality that effectively reinforces the liminality of the subject; in being neither wholly one thing nor the other, the subject is destined to inhabit a zero identity, defined by social invisibility.

The notion of social dislocation as being a defining characteristic of migrant identity, is further reinforced by the portrayal of London's West-Indian community in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Contemporaneous with *Invisible Man*, the novel depicts the isolation that typifies the migrant experience of the mid-1950s. The narrative opens with an image of London that sets the tone for the proceeding novel: the capital is described as having 'a kind of unrealness' about it, 'with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet.'<sup>375</sup> Similarly to the evocation of setting in Ellison's text, Selvon depicts the London landscape as possessing a certain liminality that is later reflected in the novel's characters, and moreover is reflected in later fictional engagements with the city, as seen in the previous chapter. With an ethereal fog enveloping the city, vision is impaired, with individuals becoming isolated by their invisibility; they can neither see to locate themselves, nor be seen by others. Certainly, as the novel follows Moses Aloetta, and the West-Indian migrants who effectively form a community around him, the sense of dislocation that defines their existence becomes increasingly evident. Cultural segregation is shown to be an inevitable consequence of the landscape, which is described as being partitioned so that 'you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers' (p.74). The clear problem faced by Moses *et al*, however, is locating the section of the community to which they belong; for while their forged West-Indian alliance ensures that they are not totally isolated, they nonetheless remain problematically dislocated from both their 'home' and 'host' societies. As Moses reflects to Galahad, 'after all these years [in

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<sup>374</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. & Teri Hume Oliver (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p.11

<sup>375</sup> Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1985; London: Longman, 1999), p.23

London] I ain't get no place at all, I still the same way, neither forward nor backward' (p.129). The overarching sense of disorientation is further reinforced throughout the narrative by the depiction of the disorientating landscape of the city, where 'fellars don't see one another for years' (p.43). As Galahad drifts through London, his isolation becomes increasingly pronounced, and in observing those who traverse the landscape with purpose, his sense of dislocation is magnified: 'everybody doing something or going somewhere, is only he who walking stupid' (p.42).

The perpetual sense of being 'neither forward nor backward', neither 'doing something' nor 'going somewhere', reinforces the notion of the inherent transience of migrant identity. The lack of social presence that typifies migrant experience is made evident early on in the narrative during a conversation between Moses and the newly arrived Galahad:

'The only thing,' Galahad say when they was in the tube going to the Water, 'is that I find when I talk smoke coming out of my mouth.'

'Is so it is in this country,' Moses say. 'Sometimes the words freeze and you have to melt it to hear the talk' (p.35)

The exchange is seemingly an innocuous one that emphasises the physical impediments to which the British-migrant must become accustomed, yet the conversation further alludes to the difficulties experienced by migrants in communicating to wider society. Moses' visualisation of words freezing on their utterance is symbolic of the social dislocation that he and his associates experience throughout the novel. Just as Ellison's protagonist remains invisible, so too the lives of Moses and his fellow migrants go unacknowledged. Effectively silenced by a wider society that strips them of their individuality, London's West-Indian migrant population are instead prescribed a homogenous, and indeed anonymous, subjectivity: responding to Galahad's buoyant naivety on his arrival in the city, Moses reasons that 'to them you will be just another one of them black Jamaicans who coming to London thinking that the streets paved with gold' (p.41).

Crucially, however, the processes of homogenisation to which Moses and 'the boys' are subject, are shown to be both imposed by a hostile British society and *self-enforced*. In an essay that explores the representation of London in Selvon's novels, Susheila Nasta argues that 'the tensions and conflicts implicit in the idea of

creolisation are a frequent theme in Selvon's art,' to the extent that 'in the black London that [he] creates in *The Lonely Londoners*, we are unaware of the "boys" particular cultural identities.'<sup>376</sup> She goes on to observe that the homogenising dynamic of the group is so powerful that Nigerian-born Cap begins to behave like a West Indian: promising to pay back a loan of eight pounds, Cap makes 'the sign of the cross with his forefingers and kissing it, as he see the West Indian boys do' (p.59). There is the understanding, made explicit in *The Lonely Londoners* and indeed maintained throughout the texts of the later post-migrant tradition, that in order to gain a sense of belonging, or rather to transcend one's 'loneliness', individuality must necessarily be renounced. Certainly, within Moses' group, the individual cultural heritage and identity of members is effectively extinguished as each is 'renamed'. Within the novel, integration, either into the West Indian-British community or British society more generally, is shown to be a practice enabled by cultural sacrifice, yet it is simultaneously revealed to be an incomplete process, as the novel's depiction of Harris demonstrates:

Harris is a fellar who like to play ladedda, and he like English customs and thing, he does be polite and say thank you and he does get up in the bus and the tube to let woman sit down, which is a thing even them Englishmen don't do. And when he dress, you think is some Englishman going to work in the city, bowler and umbrella, and briefcase tuck under the arm, with *The Times* fold up in the pocket so the name would show, and he walking upright like if is he alone who alive in the world. Only thing, Harris face black (p.111).

The last qualifying statement is crucial to the account, as it suggests that complete assimilation into British society is fundamentally unachievable. Despite Harris mimicking traits to the extent that he appears 'more English than the English'<sup>377</sup> (a notion Zadie Smith will later explore in *White Teeth*), his racial difference ensures that his assimilation remains incomplete. Pre-empting Homi K. Bhabha's conception of

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<sup>376</sup> Sushelia Nasta, 'Setting Up Home in a City of Words: Sam Selvon's London Novels' in *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Britain*, ed. A. Robert Lee (London: Pluto Press, 1995), pp.53-54

<sup>377</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p.328

postcolonial mimicry, Harris's residual identity transcends his emergent, fabricated subjectivity, ensuring that he is perceived as 'almost the same, but not white.'<sup>378</sup>

The themes of disorientation and transience that feature within the depictions of migrant identity as seen in *Invisible Man* and *The Lonely Londoners*, are examined within the later theories of postcolonialism<sup>379</sup>, and moreover continue to define representations of the 'Other' within the proceeding fiction of the post-migrant tradition. The difficulties endemic to the processes of integration, and the intrinsic complexities of migrant identity are further explored in Hanif Kureishi's screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1984). Set in London in the mid-1980s, the screenplay follows the burgeoning relationship between Omar, a young British-Asian, and Johnny, a former school-friend and reformed neo-fascist. Aligned with the depiction of migrant identity as outlined above, the construction of Omar's subjectivity is continually negotiated and contested by his cultural dislocation; indeed, his portrayal as a figure isolated from both English culture and his Pakistani heritage, has clear parallels with the earlier depictions offered by Ellison and Selvon. The son of a Pakistani father and English mother, his hybridity dictates that he is both too British and simultaneously, not British enough. The omnipresent threat of Genghis's racist gang serves as a reminder of the hostility to which British-Asians are frequently subject, and in positioning him as the object of their malevolent gaze (evoking connotations of the objectification of the Orient by the Occident), Omar's dislocation from British society is reaffirmed. Moreover, despite his Uncle Nasser's acknowledgement that 'he's pure bloody family,'<sup>380</sup> Omar's assumed Englishness isolates him from the closed community of his relatives, and functions to deny him his Asian heritage. Dubbed 'a little Britisher' by his father (p.26) and described by Salim as having 'too much white blood' (p.31), Omar's dislocation from his inherited culture is most evident as Nasser indignantly refuses his requests to be entertained by tales of

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<sup>378</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (2004; Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2005), p.128

<sup>379</sup> See also Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). For later reflections addressing the complexities and contradictions inherent to postcolonial subjectivity, see Salman Rushdie's collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (1991; London: Penguin Books, 1992), Stuart Hall's seminal essay 'New Ethnicities' in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996); and Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (2004; Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2005).

<sup>380</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* in *Collected Screenplays Volume 1: My Beautiful Laundrette, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, London Kills Me, My Son the Fanatic* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p.47

the family's life in Lahore, on the basis that they are 'stories about a place you've never been' (p.39).

The unlikely philosophising of Genghis that 'everyone has to belong' (p.46), is a sentiment that permeates the narrative, yet which for Omar, and others, remains unrealised – much like the fictional engagements with 'species consciousness as explored in the previous chapter. Indeed, despite Cherry's logic that the 'in-betweens [...] should make up their minds where they are' (p.18), *My Beautiful Laundrette* insists upon the complexity and problematic duality of migrant experience – Cherry herself is referred to as 'Salim's Anglo-Indian wife' (p.17) – that ensures that the process of 'belonging' is invariably incomplete. Certainly, the transience of migrant identity is made explicit as the text nears its conclusion, in a succinct exchange between Omar's alcoholic father and Nasser, where they reflect upon their lives in London:

[Papa] This damn country has done us in. That's why I am like this. We should be there. Home.

[Nasser] But that country has been sodomized by religion. It is beginning to interfere with the making of money. Compared with everywhere, it is a little heaven here (pp.85-86).

Taken collectively, their statements reflect the liminal status of the British-migrant, who torn between two disparate cultures, essentially belongs to neither. The idealisation of the past that fuels Papa's desire to return 'home', and his disillusionment with his new life forged in London, is reminiscent of Moses' annual vow to return to Trinidad<sup>381</sup>, and indeed is a trope, as I will show, that continues to be explored within the later post-migrant tradition. The sense of belonging implicit to Nasser's deification of England as the land of capitalist opportunity, is undermined by his earlier reference to it as 'this damn country which we hate and love' (p.14). Moreover, like Harris in *The Lonely Londoners*, Nasser's (partial) assimilation is shown to be facilitated by the sacrificing of his cultural past. Responding to Johnny's accusations that he is reinforcing the stereotype of migrants 'hustl[ing] other people's lives and jobs and houses', Nasser asserts, 'But we're professional businessmen. Not professional Pakistanis. There's no race question in the new enterprise culture' (p.50).

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<sup>381</sup> Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, pp.140-141

Within the 'enterprise culture' of Thatcher's Britain, then, 'race' is perceived as a negligible factor to the achievement of capitalist success. Indeed, the screenplay's depiction of Nasser, and to a lesser extent Salim, reflect the then contemporary mood of 'racial harmony' as outlined by Salman Rushdie.

Writing in 1982 of the crisis in British 'postcolonial' culture, Rushdie summarises the nation's policy toward immigration as three-fold: 'integration'; 'racial harmony'; and 'multiculturalism'. While in contemporary narratives, calls for integration frequently refer to a dual process whereby the collective identities of both migrant *and* home populations are revised, Rushdie comments that in the earlier conceptualisation of the term, 'this word rapidly came to mean "assimilation": a black man could only become integrated when he started behaving like a white one.'<sup>382</sup> In this sense, notions of nationhood are viewed as static, and indeed, hegemonic; to be accepted into the British nation, one must temper one's ways to fall in line with the British ideal.<sup>383</sup> Such a notion is ostensibly characterised in Selvon's depiction of Harris, who, to Moses' bemusement, disowns his roots as a means to integrate into London society: 'You forget I know you from back home. Is only since you hit Brit'n that you getting on so English.'<sup>384</sup> Following integration, the second target of Britain's quest for diversity, as suggested in Rushdie's model, is 'racial harmony', followed by the third and final strata represented by the emergence of multicultural thinking (to be explored within the conclusion of this study). Similarly to the goal of integration which preceded it, the liberating potential evoked in the very terms used to describe the second stage, once again belie its authoritarian and fundamentally limiting scope. Rushdie comments that while the attitude sounds both 'virtuous and desirable', what it means in reality is the convenient negation of history:

What it meant in practice was that blacks should be persuaded to live peaceably with whites, in spite of all the injustices done to them everyday. The call for 'racial harmony' was simply an invitation to shut up and smile while nothing was done about our grievances.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'The New Empire Within Britain' in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (1991; London: Penguin Books, 1992), p.137

<sup>383</sup> That a unified and stable British identity is a fallacy, as demonstrated by the competing narratives of English, Scottish and Welsh identity, is ostensibly disregarded.

<sup>384</sup> Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, p.113

<sup>385</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'The New Empire Within Britain' in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, p.137

In this sense, racial harmony might better be thought of as (enforced) ‘social harmony’, as notions of race appear to be completely disregarded in favour of a shared sense of unified community, or specifically in Nasser’s case the unified community of enterprise culture. Clearly, however, the masking of individual history required by such an approach, is intensely problematic and evokes the inception of a volatile politics of identity, illustrated in Nasser’s confused allegiance to the country which he both ‘hates and loves’ in equal measure. Moreover, unlike Selvon’s depiction of Harris, Nasser’s emergent Britishness is destabilised by a residual allegiance to his cultural past; Nasser’s businessman persona, depicted in ‘evening clothes’ with Rachel, ‘looking divine’ on his arm (p.15), conflicts with his depiction as the patriarchal Asian husband and father ‘lying on his bed wearing salwar kamiz’, groaning with delight as one of his young daughters presses his legs (p.38). Despite his proclamations of attachment to London, then, similarly to Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Moses *et al.*, Nasser’s identity is shown to be defined by a continual tension between the lure of two seemingly disparate cultures, that functions to emphasise his essential dislocation from both; a trope that, as demonstrated below, continues within the later fictions of the new post-migrant tradition.

While Kureishi’s portrayal of migrant identity might broadly be thought to demonstrate a continuation of the tropes defined within the texts of the post-migrant tradition, *My Beautiful Laundrette* engages with the tradition in a knowing way, and so both exploits and resists established modes of characterisation. Reflective of the entrepreneurial spirit of the time, Nasser offers Omar the business opportunity of overhauling ‘Churchills’, a run-down laundrette that functions as ‘nothing but a toilet and a youth club’ (p.27). Keen to embrace the venture and turn the business around, Omar employs Johnny to undertake a ‘variety of menial things’ (p.33), and successfully re-launches the laundrette. The dynamic of Omar and Johnny’s business and personal relationship resists and subverts the established assumptions of the indigenous/migrant dichotomy, as depicted in both *Invisible Man* and *The Lonely Londoners*. Certainly, Bart Moore-Gilbert, in comparing the relationship between Omar and Johnny to that of Fielding and Aziz, as depicted in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), suggests that the screenplay might be thought to offer an inversion of colonial paradigms, since ‘Johnny’s dependence on Omar plays off the colonialist trope of “the faithful servant”’; and in providing Johnny with work, Omar

contributes to his friend's moral regeneration in a way that parodically recalls the colonialist project of "civilising" the brutal natives.<sup>386</sup> As is typical of much of Kureishi's subsequent fiction, however, the characterisation featured in the screenplay resists such simple formulation, and instead emphasises the contradictions that are inherent to migrant identity. While elements of Omar's characterisation undeniably subvert 'colonialist tropes', as the conflicting politics of identity that defines his subjectivity demonstrates, *My Beautiful Laundrette* resists interpretation as a diatribe against colonialist doctrine. Indeed, we might argue that in both reinforcing and challenging the dominant archetypes of the post-migrant tradition, *My Beautiful Laundrette* is suggestive of the emergent 'new' post-migrant tradition.

#### 4.2.2 The 'New' Post-Migrant Tradition

*Il y a plus affaire à interpreter les interpretations qu'à interpreter les choses,  
et plus de livres sur les livres que sur autre subject: nous ne faisons que nous  
entregloser.*

(Montaigne)

Tracing the evolution of contemporary multiculturalism, Modood suggests that the publication of *The Satanic Verses* marked a watershed in conceptions of British-Muslim identity. Characterising the mood prior to the Rushdie Affair as 'saris, samosas and steelbands', he argues that the international reception of the novel induced a shift in British multiculturalism, that while retaining 'aspects of the anti-racist critique of the 1980s [...] began to take the Muslim challenge with a new and deserved seriousness.'<sup>387</sup> As many critics argue, the competing responses to the novel functioned to highlight the antipathy between Eastern and Western cultures, with 'the ensuing debates, protests and the *fatwa* calling for Rushdie's execution [fuelling] negative perceptions and hostility to Islam in Britain.'<sup>388</sup> There is a sense that the reaction to the novel, rather than the content of the narrative itself, posed the greater threat to the perception of Islam. As Michael Hanne contends, 'it is

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<sup>386</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp.73-74

<sup>387</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p.15

<sup>388</sup> Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004), p.145



sometimes difficult to decide which has the more bizarre plot: Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, or any version a historian might set down of the spectacular series of events on a national and international level, linked to the publication of the novel.<sup>389</sup> Certainly, the competing ideas expressed through the debate – 'views of a secular liberal society defending the freedom of the individual and the Muslim voice demanding redress for a perceived blasphemous insult to their religion'<sup>390</sup> – reinforced the apparent polarisation of cultures perhaps more vociferously than the content of the novel itself.<sup>391</sup> For the British-Muslim, the implications of the Affair further served to problematise and place limits upon their already negotiated identity. The sense of polarity that was inherent to the argument provided British-Muslims with a reductive politics of identity, with only two disparate options and no moderate middle ground. With an alarming simplicity that would be echoed in Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric, the debate dictated that individuals fall decisively on either side of the argument – 'one is either with us or against us in the fight against censorship/blasphemy' – and as such, 'sacrifice' was again reinforced as being a defining characteristic of British-Muslim subjectivity; migrant hybridity was essentially undermined, as the argument dictates that individuals choose between loyalty to the nation and obedience to an allegedly contrary religious faith.

While the implications of the Affair incited zealous debates relating to the problematic politics of British-Muslim identity, the concerns generated have clear parallels with earlier constructions of migrant subjectivity; the notion of 'sacrifice' as detailed above, is reflected in the questioning of the extent to which Muslims can successfully 'assimilate' into British culture whilst remaining faithful to their allegedly disparate faith. Certainly, as I will demonstrate below, many of the fictional representations of the British-Muslim following the Affair adhere to the formula of the dislocated and schizophrenic individual as outlined within the post-

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<sup>389</sup> Michael Hanne, *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change* (1994; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), p.191

<sup>390</sup> Ron Greaves, 'Negotiating British Citizenship and Muslim Identity' in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, ed. Tahir Abbas (London: Zed Books, 2005), p.69

<sup>391</sup> For further discussions of *The Satanic Verses* and the implications generated by the Affair, see John D. Erickson's chapter 'The View from Underneath: Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*' in *Islam and Postcolonial Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), which written largely prior to Khomeini's issuing of his *fatwa*, offers an analysis of the novel which is based on the premise that 'no other work of Salman Rushdie has gone further in the struggle to lessen the hold of the state (or ruling discourses of states) and means of expression'; and Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland's edited collection *The Rushdie File* (London: Fourth Estate, 1989) which offers an overview of many of the debates surrounding the novel, including an interesting reflection of the nature of 'Truth' and 'Fiction' from a number of prominent figures (pp.179-184).

migrant tradition. A clear point of divergence, however, is that the fictional portrayals of the ‘post-Rushdie Muslim’ possess a playful self-awareness that in both resisting and exploiting the archetypal depictions of migrant existence, are effectively ‘attuned to the demands of the marketplace’; and thus the emergent representation as outlined in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, becomes dominant within the new post-migrant tradition.

In Kureishi’s *The Black Album* (1995), the ideological expectations of a liberal British multiculturalism are challenged in the post-Rushdie period by the emergent contradictions and limitations inherent to the construction of a British-Muslim identity. The novel follows Shahid, a young British-Asian whose search for self- and social-validation is characterised by a continual tension between his desire for liberal gratification, encapsulated by his relationship with college lecturer Deedee, and religious observance, represented by the lure of the austere form of Islam practised by Riaz. Significantly, the alleged antithesis between the spiritual purity of Islam and the hedonistic superficiality of a corrupt Western society, is further expressed through Deedee’s characterisation as lecturer in postmodernism; indeed, her vacuous, yet sybaritic, lifestyle (‘when I can, I do a lot of nothing. And I make stabs at pleasure’<sup>392</sup>), neatly encapsulates ‘perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms’: ‘a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality.’<sup>393</sup>

Set in 1989, *The Black Album* reflects the apparent cultural dichotomy evoked by the Rushdie Affair, and as the narrative progresses and Shahid becomes increasingly torn between a life of drug- and sex-fuelled hedonism, and one of puritanical fundamentalism, there is a sense that the very terms that define his identity (i.e. British-Muslim) are mutually exclusive. Indeed, despite Shahid’s eventual recognition that identity cannot be defined by ‘one system or creed’ alone (p.274), the novel offers little resistance to the dominant stereotypes that serve to limit and construct his subjectivity. Rather than challenging social assumptions, the characterisation of the novel reinforces the polarised conception of British society as generated by the Rushdie Affair. Reappropriating the nature of much of the criticism directed toward *The Satanic Verses*, Ruvani Ranasinha suggests that the form of

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<sup>392</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album* (1995; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p.55

<sup>393</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991; London, Verso, 1999)

characterisation used in the novel emphasises the extent to which Kureishi is consciously writing for a Western audience, depicting his characters ‘in terms it will find sympathetic.’<sup>394</sup> She goes on to argue that ‘in reinforcing stereotypes of devout Muslims or fundamentalists that are already inscribed in the media, his work offers little prospect of any kind of constructive dialogue between polarized communities or indeed within Muslim communities.’<sup>395</sup> Kureishi ostensibly allows no space for the voice of moderate Islam within the novel: British-Muslims are portrayed either as fully assimilated British hedonists, as in the case of Shahid’s brother Chili, whose ‘relentless passion had always been for clothes, girls, cars, girls and the money that bought them’ (p.41); or incandescent radicals who, as encapsulated by Chad, reject the liberal pretensions of British multiculturalism, proclaiming instead that ‘we must not assimilate [...] it’s not we who must change, but the world!’ (p.81). While characters such as Chili and Chad arguably reinforce established *social* stereotypes, however, there is also the sense of the characters being conceived within an ongoing post-migrant tradition.

The notion of cultural stasis, of going ‘neither forward or backward’, that defines the identity of Selvon’s migrants, for instance, is clearly reflected in *The Black Album* through the characters’ continual striving to ‘belong’. Indeed, rather than interpreting the depiction of Chad, for instance, as a superficial rendering of an established stereotype (as Ranasinha intimates), we might instead argue that the basis of his characterisation can be located back to the exploitation of earlier fictional manifestations. Similarly to Moses and Omar, Chad finds himself dislocated both from his current and inherited culture, and like the Invisible Man who is redefined on joining ‘the Brotherhood’<sup>396</sup>, he turns to radicalism as a means to establish and assert a positive identity. While Riaz proclaims that ‘without religion society is impossible’ (p.33), for Chad the sudden conversion to Islam is less about regaining a repressed theological purity, and more about forging an identity for himself that is validated, if not by wider society, then broadly by ‘like-minded’ people. Adopted by a white couple determined to extinguish any residual trace of his Pakistani heritage, Chad’s ‘Otherness’ is nonetheless reinforced by his being continually subjected to ‘English

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<sup>394</sup> In reflecting upon the furore surrounding the novel, Edward Said similarly suggests that ‘that it dealt with Islam in English for what was believed to be a largely Western audience was its main offence’ (Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p.370).

<sup>395</sup> Ruvani Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2002), p.82

<sup>396</sup> On being initiated, the narrator is given a slip of paper detailing his ‘new identity’ (p.309).

country cottages and ordinary English people who were secure, who effortlessly belonged' (p.106). As Deedee explains to Shahid, Chad's sense of exclusion intensified throughout his childhood as he became increasingly aware that he would never 'effortlessly' belong:

When he got to be a teenager he saw he had no roots, no connections with Pakistan, couldn't even speak the language. So he went to Urdu classes. But when he tried asking for the salt in Southall everyone fell about at his accent. In England white people looked at him as if he were going to steal their car or their handbag, particularly as he dressed like a ragamuffin. But in Pakistan they looked at him even more strangely. Why should he be able to fit into a Third World theocracy? (p.107)

Deedee goes on to suggest that such was Chad's need to be accepted, that 'he even tried the Labour Party, to try to find a place', before deciding that 'it was too racist and his anger was too much' (p.108).

The sense of dislocation that continues to impinge upon post-migrant identity is further encapsulated in the novel by the internalised conflict that defines Shahid's constantly shifting identity. Like Chad, the irresistible lure of Riaz's puritanical Islamism is primarily a result of Shahid's need to establish a coherent identity, rather than a desire to embrace the all-encompassing principals of theological dogma; 'he felt a physical pride in their cause, whatever it was' (p.83). Indeed, throughout the novel Shahid challenges the ideologies espoused by Riaz, and remains anxious that his lack of religious observance will expose his Muslim identity as fraudulent:

Shahid was afraid his ignorance would place him in no man's land. These days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew – brandishing whichever features they could claim, as if without a tag they wouldn't be human. Shahid, too, wanted to belong to his people (p.92).

For Shahid, however – as with the Invisible Man and Moses – the brandishing of a distinct, singular identity is unceasingly impeded by the divergent cultural affiliations that constitute his progressively schizophrenic subjectivity.

The depiction of Shahid replicates the formula of the dislocated individual as defined by the post-migrant tradition, and furthermore his sense of being torn between two antithetical cultures reflects the notion of double-consciousness as outlined by Du Bois. Kureishi's portrayal differs from earlier fictional manifestations, however, in the manner in which the parallels are *overtly* drawn. Shahid does not just reflect the duality of migrant experience as defined by Du Bois, but rather Kureishi explicitly reappropriates the very essence of his polemic:

His own self increasingly confounded him. One day he could passionately feel one thing, the next day the opposite. [...] He would wake up with this feeling: who would he turn out to be on this day? How many warring selves were there within him? Which was his real, natural self? Was there such a thing? How would he know it when he saw it?

The narrative continues by describing Shahid as 'lost in [...] a room of broken mirrors with jagged reflections backing into eternity' (p.147). The motif of the broken mirror features frequently within postcolonial and post-migrant fiction, and is symbolic of the fragmented concept of self that characterises migrant identity.<sup>397</sup> The reference alludes to Rushdie's conception of the migrant writer, as detailed in his 1982 essay 'Imaginary Homelands'. Referring to the unreliable narration of *Midnight's Children's* Saleem, Rushdie comments, 'it may be that when the Indian writer who writes outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.'<sup>398</sup> For Shahid, the broken shards of the mirror have not so much 'been irretrievably lost', but rather are so multiple that his projected image is interminably deferred back onto the endless fragments 'backing into eternity'.

In explicitly alluding to recognisable constructions of migrant identity, the novel possesses a self-awareness that is both suggestive of the postmodern tradition, and emblematic of the fiction of the new post-migrant tradition. The novel, as with many other texts conceived within the emergent tradition, is highly intertextual, and as such, its status as a work of fiction is emphasised. *The Black Album*, and indeed much of Kureishi's subsequent fiction, is concerned not so much with interpreting

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<sup>397</sup> Unable to pass through the Lacanian 'mirror stage', the subject is unable to recognise himself as a coherent individual, and thus ceaselessly defines his identity through the image of the other.

<sup>398</sup> Salman Rushdie 'Imaginary Homelands' in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp.10-11

(faithfully) migrant identity, but rather with exploring and critiquing the interpretations of migrant identity. Indeed, in alluding to some of the concerns generated by the Rushdie Affair (neither *The Satanic Verses* nor Rushdie are explicitly referred to in the narrative), the novel interrogates the contemporary debates relating to the representation of the Muslim within fictional narratives, and the expected function of literature more generally; debates which, as shown below, would intensify following the events of 9/11.

The set piece of the text, Riaz's burning of *The Satanic Verses* in front of an excitable crowd of students, reflects the cultural division that responses to the novel generated. As Chad tilts the book and Hat raises a lighter to its pages, Shahid's 'warring selves' prevent him from having an intuitive response to the protest: 'He wanted to appear neutral but he knew that wasn't possible. [...] He was someone who couldn't join in, couldn't let himself go' (p.225). Shahid's conflicting sense of self, as shown, is evident throughout the narrative, and indeed, prior to the book burning, his internalised monologues function to outline the competing (literary) debates incited by the Affair:

The problem was, when he was with his friends their story compelled him. But when he walked out, like someone leaving a cinema, he found the world to be more subtle and inexplicable. He knew, too, that stories were made up by men and women; they could not be true or false, for they were exercises in that most magnificent but unreliable capacity, the imagination, which William Blake called 'the divine body in every man'. Yet his friends would admit no splinter of imagination into their body of belief, for that would poison all, rendering their conviction human, aesthetic, fallible (p.133).

Shahid at once realises that the religious parables recited by his friends are wholly distinct from the 'realities' of his existence, in much the same way that many critics defended Rushdie's fictional portrayal of Islam in *The Satanic Verses*. Conversely, the puritanical belief expressed by his friends towards the tales, is redolent of the criticism directed at the novel by members of the Islamic community, which subsequently reinvigorated debates relating to the assumed social and moral responsibilities of the author.

The competing claims of the debate are further reflected through a meeting arranged by Shahid with Riaz *et al.* Organised with the intent of enabling Shahid to defend the continued social relevance of fiction, the ensuing exchange reflects the antithetical arguments that were generated by the Affair. Shahid's skittish opening statement, detailing the concerns to be considered, offers a succinct overview of the issues at stake:

Story-telling. This is the issue! Why we need it. If we need it. What can be said. And – and what can't be. What mustn't be said. What is taboo and forbidden and why. What is censored. How censorship benefits us in exile here. How it might protect us, if it can do that. That – that kind of thing.

Despite his impassioned, if fragmented, précis, the proceeding exchange is dominated by Riaz and his impenetrable view that 'fiction is, by its very nature a form of lying' – interestingly, a sentiment that would later be echoed in Germaine Greer's condemnation of *Brick Lane*, primarily in her assertion that 'there is no representation without misrepresentation.'<sup>399</sup> Dismissing Shahid's liberal humanist defence that 'literature helps us reflect on our nature', Riaz denounces the novel, situating it as one of the 'many fictions that expose a corrupt nature.' Aligning Rushdie with the 'yarn-spinners [who] have usually grovelled for acceptance to the white élite so they can be considered "great authors"', Riaz's condemnation of the novel is founded upon his belief that such authors who, in embracing a Western lifestyle and so disinheriting themselves from their cultural past, 'live apart from their people' and therefore lack the necessary authority to represent the community faithfully (pp.182-183).

The justification for Riaz's vilification of Rushdie is reflective of the form of Islamic fundamentalism that he embraces, which is founded upon communicating and reinforcing the puritanical 'truths about the importance of faith' (p.184), and in consigning to Allah's wrath those nefarious individuals lured from the path of righteousness by the corrupting forces of Western society. Deedee recounts to Shahid how 'Riaz was kicked out of his parent's house for denouncing his own father for drinking alcohol' and how 'he told his friends that if one's parents did wrong they should be thrown into the raging fire of hell.' For Riaz, the Muslim living within

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<sup>399</sup> Germaine Greer, 'Reality Bites' in *Guardian* (July 24, 2006)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/jul/24/culture.books>> (accessed 29.10.08)

British society is constantly haunted by the spectre of Westoxification, which lures the devout to veer from the essential truths of Islamic doctrine, and thus a turn to fundamentalism is an attempt to reclaim the purity of Islam from the corrupting forces of Western depravity. Such a depiction of the fundamentalist is symptomatic of the writing of second and third generation migrants where, as Tahir Abbas suggests, ‘issues of concern have shifted from cultural assimilation and social integration to religious identity and discrimination.’<sup>400</sup> Indeed, the generational divide between the austere piety of Riaz and the apathetic engagement with Islam practiced by his father, who prays ‘in his armchair and not on his knees’ (p.109), is representative of such a shift.

The process of cultural Othering generated from the Rushdie Affair, and as depicted in *The Black Album*, inevitably led to a shift in Western perceptions of the Muslim. As Modood argues, ‘until *The Satanic Verses* Affair, Asian men were stereotyped as unassertive, overdeferential, and docile’, yet ‘within a few years, the prevalent stereotype of Muslim men [...] included the idea that they were inflexible, always demanding something, fanatical and aggressive.’<sup>401</sup> The apparent turn to fanaticism evident within the younger generation of Muslims is further expressed in the narrative as Shahid reflects upon a family trip to Karachi. Urged to attend the local mosque with his cousins whilst the family elders gorge on the imported products of Western culture, he recalls how ‘the religious enthusiasm of the younger generation, and its links to strong political feeling had surprised him’ (p.91). While, such a generational shift in perception is clearly evident within much British post-migrant fiction of the 1990s, as Parveen Akhtar asserts, the apparent surge in young Muslims embracing radical Islam might not necessarily equate to a widespread return to religion. She argues instead that the ‘events and debates generally taken to be examples of a return to, or change in, the intensity of Islamic practice, can sometimes be more accurately described as a change in the *relationship* Muslims have with their “host” country.’<sup>402</sup> With the possible exception of Riaz, such a notion would appear to be evidently true within *The Black Album*, where despite a younger generation of Muslims seemingly turning to religion as a means to assert a coherent identity, the

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<sup>400</sup> Tahir Abbas, ‘British South Asian Muslims: Before and After September 11’, in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, p.13

<sup>401</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p.14

<sup>402</sup> Parveen Akhtar, ‘(Re)turn to Religion and Radical Islam’ in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, pp.165-166



social potential of Islam is shown to lie in its political ideology, rather than its theological dogma. Although explored in *The Black Album*, the assumed generational shift in perceptions of the Muslim is encapsulated most saliently in Kureishi's screenplay *My Son the Fanatic* (1998).

Adapted from the previously published short story of the same name, the screenplay uses the generational gap between father and son to reflect the transition in perceptions of Islam from moderation and docility (Parvez) to intransigent fanaticism (Farid). 'My Son the Fanatic', in its original form, was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1994, and was later re-printed and included in Kureishi's collection of short stories, *Love in a Blue Time* (1997). The story, although framed by an omniscient narrator, is told from the perspective of Parvez, a British-Pakistani and reluctant Muslim:

Parvez had grown up in Lahore where all the boys had been taught the Koran. To stop him falling asleep when he studied, the Moulvi had attached a piece of string to the ceiling and tied it to Parvez's hair, so that if his head fell forward, he would instantly awake. After this indignity Parvez had avoided all religions.<sup>403</sup>

Similarly to *The Black Album* the story scrutinises the processes of Western multiculturalism that serve to negotiate and contest British-Muslim identity. Like the novel, 'My Son the Fanatic' exploits existing caricatures, and in so doing, deconstructs the hybridity of British-Muslim identity, instead offering polarised depictions that exemplify the disparity between cultures. Plainly, Parvez is not the hedonist that Chili is, yet the narrative likewise emphasises the irreconcilable subjectivities available to British-Muslims. While Parvez dreams of telling Ali (who will later be renamed Farid in the screenplay) 'stories about their family in Pakistan' (p.123), as a means to assimilate into British society he casts aside the traditions of his past and instead embraces the present: Ali recalls how on ordering his wife to cook him pork sausages, Parvez had rebuked her by declaring 'you're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in!' (p.125) – a proclamation that within the screenplay will be

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<sup>403</sup> Hanif Kureishi, 'My Son the Fanatic' in *Love in a Blue Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.123

redirected toward Farid.<sup>404</sup> Conversely, the love Parvez expresses towards the liberal outlook of England ('they let you do almost anything here') is inverted in Ali, who embraces Islam as a means to escape the corrupting influences of the West. In a discussion initiated by Parvez as a means to broach the subject of his son's 'unusual behaviour', Ali justifies his sudden conversion to Islam by declaring: 'The Law of Islam would rule the world; the skin of the infidel would burn off again and again; the Jews and Christers would be routed. The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes' (p.126).

The intensity of Ali's beliefs and the hatred that he directs towards the West, however, are challenged by the fact that he is essentially a product of British society. While he attributes his sudden conversion to Islamism to the experience of 'living in the West', his idealisation of 'home,' and contention that there is 'more to the world than the West,' is undermined by his having never left England (pp.126-128). Aligning himself with an oppressed global *ummah* (p.129), his condemnation of the persecution of *his* people is similarly contentious, having himself been brought up in relatively comfortable surroundings, and, as the extensive list of his discarded goods suggests, having been wholly submersed within the commodity culture of the West that he so vehemently denounces (p.119). In this sense, Kureishi's depiction of Ali as a young British Muslim seeking to reclaim a lost past from which he is entirely disconnected, substantiates Akhtar's proposal. Although he goes through the religious motions – Ali attends Mosque and prays 'without fail' five times a day – it is the ideological, rather than the theological, doctrines of Islam that he embraces, essentially as a means to prevent him from becoming, like his father, 'too implicated in Western civilisation' (p.125). Such a problematic conception of the young Islamic fanatic emerges throughout the new post-migrant tradition – *Brick Lane*'s Karim is an obvious parallel, which I will consider later – and indeed is further interrogated within the subsequent screenplay.

*My Son the Fanatic*, the screenplay, offers a much-extended version of the short story, with its altered form allowing for shifts in focalization that enable a far greater exploration of character. Bart Moore-Gilbert has attributed the revisions to the intervening publication of *The Black Album*, arguing that the alterations reflect Kureishi's 'reconsideration of the problems posed by [the novel's] treatment of similar

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<sup>404</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic* in *Collected Screenplays Volume 1: My Beautiful Laundrette, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, London Kills Me, My Son the Fanatic*, p.333

issues.’<sup>405</sup> Certainly, while the depiction of British-Asian identities remains, so far as Parvez and Farid are concerned, broadly polarised – Parvez renounces the theological and ideological doctrines of Islam, whilst Farid vigorously embraces them – the characterisation, as one would expect from a lengthier narrative, is noticeably more complex, and as such, Kureishi is able to interrogate the assumptions and contradictions of multicultural subjectivity much more satisfactorily. While the short story features only three figures – Bettina, a prostitute befriended by Parvez, is essentially the text’s ‘Deedee’, personifying the shadow of immorality and promiscuity that hangs over Western society – the screenplay introduces a number of secondary characters, which function to problematise the allegedly unambiguous dichotomy between British and Muslim identities, and so allow the, albeit diminutive, voice of moderate Islam to be heard; even if, as in the case of the anonymously described ‘Man’, Islamic moderation is established merely as a means to emphasise the fanaticism that is associated with the younger generation.<sup>406</sup> Moreover, the screenplay allows for a more refined exploration of character, which further challenges the antithetical distinction between ‘assimilated’ British-Muslims and Islamic radicals; Farid’s piety, for instance, is undermined in a comical scene where, having berated his father for eating ‘the pig’, he reluctantly admits that he himself ‘perhaps’ enjoyed the occasional ‘bacon butty’ (p.332).

Moore-Gilbert argues that the rendering of Parvez and Farid within *My Son the Fanatic* demonstrates a continuation of Kureishi’s parodic examination of the assumptions of colonialist discourse, as evidenced in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. He suggests that the simultaneous reinforcing and reworking of stereotypes that typifies the screenplay, ‘strongly suggests the influence of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.’<sup>407</sup> Certainly, the screenplay interrogates more significantly the extent to which the residual assumptions of Orientalism and the emergent implications of multiculturalism negotiate British-Muslim identities. As explored in *The Black Album*, and indeed within the fictions of the earlier post-migrant tradition, the narrative considers the extent to which British-migrants are able to successfully integrate into Western society without having to renounce the cultural traditions of their heritage. Parvez succinctly outlines the dilemma faced by migrants in Britain as he challenges Farid’s self-

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<sup>405</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p.164

<sup>406</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic* in *Collected Screenplays Volume 1: My Beautiful Laundrette, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, London Kills Me, My Son the Fanatic*, p.328

<sup>407</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, p.26

enforced segregation by asking, ‘how else can we belong here except by mixing up all together?’ (p.333). For Parvez, then, British-Muslim identity is defined by sacrifice, a continuing trope of post-migrant subjectivity.

Moreover, similarly to the narratives of the earlier post-migrant tradition, integration is shown in *My Son the Fanatic* to be an incomplete process. With a latent Orientalism defining the West’s relationship to the migrant, the narrative suggests that cultural difference, even if sacrificed, will inevitably (re)establish the Muslim as ‘Other’. As Farid argues, ‘whatever we do here we will always be inferior’ (p.334). Despite embracing a Western lifestyle, Parvez’s identity continues to be defined by dislocation, with his Pakistani-heritage ensuring that the process of ‘mixing up’ is never fully accomplished, and the incremental passing of time in England severing any remaining ties with his former life. For Farid, the embracing of Islamic fundamentalism is essentially an attempt to reclaim his father’s disconnected heritage for himself, and so resist the forms of oppression that continue to impact upon his hybrid identity. Justifying his conversion to Islamism to Parvez, he argues, ‘the brothers have given me the strength to save myself. In the midst of corruption there can be purity’ (p.344). In much the same way as *The Black Album* conceives of a generational divide relating to the expression of British-Muslim identity from docility to fanaticism, so the juxtaposition of Parvez’s religious indifference with Farid’s desperate search for purity amongst corruption, is redolent of the proposed shift in perception of the Muslim initiated by the Rushdie Affair.

Attributing the publication of *The Satanic Verses* with the inception of a more problematic politics of identity for Muslims, Modood argues that the concerns generated by the Affair are reinvigorated by the events of 9/11. In his foreword to Tahir Abbas’s edited collection *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, Tariq Modood argues that ‘the situation of British Muslims has been thrown into sharp relief by September 11 and its aftermath. [...] They have found themselves bearing the brunt of a new wave of suspicion and hostility.’ He goes on to suggest that as a result of the new global climate following 9/11, across Europe ‘multiculturalism – a policy suitable where groups want to maintain some level of distinction among communities – is in retreat and integration is once again the watchword.’<sup>408</sup> A study that explores the

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<sup>408</sup> Tariq Modood, ‘Foreword’ to *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, ed. Tahir Abbas (London: Zed Books, 2005), p.viii

problematic relationship between Islam and Britain, Modood's assertions set the tone for the proceeding arguments, which almost unanimously propose that the events of 9/11 mark a watershed in constructions of British Muslim identity.<sup>409</sup> Indeed, Abbas's collection is only one study amongst many others that collectively form a convincing discourse addressing the apparent return of a revitalised form of Orientalism within the post-9/11 world which firmly places the figure of the Muslim as the irrational, barbaric Other.<sup>410</sup>

Unsurprisingly, reflections of the assumed intensification of East/West relations within the post-9/11 climate have not been limited to the abstract polemics of socio-political commentary. Similarly to the texts published in the aftermath of the Rushdie Affair, much contemporary fiction, which has as its backdrop, either explicitly or incidentally, the post-9/11 landscape reflects such a shift in mood, and as many Western authors have discovered, the emergent bifurcated global climate brings with it a more complex politics of representation. Certainly, despite the liberal consensus that 'a novel is a novel is a novel,'<sup>411</sup> the (albeit slightly muffled) furore that surrounded the publication and subsequent filming of Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* is redolent of an increased burden of representation placed on contemporary authors following the events of September 11: namely, how to reflect and interrogate the social and political tensions of the altered global mood without inadvertently reaffirming the prejudices that the narrative seeks to explore; or in Ali's case, how to

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Modood's claims relating to the apparent 'retreat' of multiculturalism in the post-9/11 landscape will be examined in the conclusion to this study.

<sup>409</sup> Tahir Abbas argues that 'the repercussions of September 11 have had far-reaching consequences for South Asian Muslims in Britain' and that subsequently 'the everyday norms and values of [them] have been questioned in more ways than were necessary' ('British South Asian Muslims: Before and After September 11', p.4); Chris Allen suggests that 'post-9/11 reificatory processes have [...] both re-established and newly established Muslims as chimerical, monstrous others', concluding that within 'the climate of fear initiated by 9/11, all Muslims without distinction are widely seen as the enemy within (others, "sleepers", fifth columnists) as well as without ("axis of evil", "green menace")' ('From Race to Religion', pp.50-51); and Nilufar Ahmed, focusing specifically on the 'insulated' Muslim community of Tower Hamlets, observes that following 9/11, 'the religious and cultural landscape began to shift' so that, torn from the 'security and safety they had enjoyed in practising their faith', residents became increasingly 'aware of the disparaging views held towards Muslims by many non-Muslims' ('Tower Hamlets: Insulation in Isolation', p.203).

<sup>410</sup> Paul Gilroy contends that the 'Bush administration's "war on terror" might be thought of as having brought the slumbering civilizational giants of Christendom and the Orient back to life' (*After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p.21); whilst Edward Said similarly asserts that the insistent manner in which 'terror and terrorism have been thrust into the public consciousness' has resulted in the polarisation of the world, typified for him by George W. Bush's oft-pronounced logic that 'you are either with us [...] or against us' (*Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p.8).

<sup>411</sup> Ian Jack, 'It's Only a Novel' in *Guardian* (December 20, 2003)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/dec/20/featuresreviews.guardianreview3>> (accessed 28.10.08)

address the increasing demonization of an established community without at once contributing to the discourse that ensures its continued vilification.

### 4.3 The Burden of Representation

Published in June 2003 to widespread critical acclaim<sup>412</sup>, *Brick Lane* is set in the eponymous region of East London and follows eighteen-year-old Nazneen as she adapts to a new life and new husband in Britain. The novel opens with a brief preliminary narrative detailing Nazneen's difficult birth in a small village in Eastern Pakistan. Born blue and lifeless, Nazneen's mother decides against sending her for medical treatment to a hospital in the city, determined instead to allow Fate to choose her destiny, convinced that 'that way, she will be stronger.'<sup>413</sup> The account of how Nazneen was left to her fate is alluded to throughout the remaining text, and functions, in the manner of much post-migrant fiction, to emphasise the assumed disparity between the rationalism of the West – Nazneen's first-born child Raqib will later be hospitalised with an unnamed mortal illness – and the exotic spiritualism of the East. Certainly, the opening narrative is reminiscent of Rushdie's magic realist rendering of Bombay in *Midnight's Children*, a novel that likewise opens with the birth of a child 'heavily embroiled in Fate.'<sup>414</sup> Similarly to Rushdie's novel, the account of Nazneen's childhood broadly adheres to the conventions of the realist tradition, yet the narrative is undercut by moments of surrealism that function to contrast the proceeding unremarkability of London with the exoticism of Gouripur; the depiction of the mysterious village sage and acting-midwife Banesa, 'who claimed to be one hundred and twenty years old, and had made this claim consistently for the past decade or so' (p.12), contrasts with the stoic pragmatism that will be later embodied by London-based GP Dr Azad.

Nazneen, allowing Fate to determine the trajectory of her life, agrees to an arranged marriage to Chanu, a pompous man with 'a face like a frog' (p.17) who, twenty years her elder, takes her to live in London. The antithetical relationship

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<sup>412</sup> During the year of its initial publication, the novel was shortlisted for the British Book Awards Literary Fiction Award, the Guardian First Book Award and the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, and was awarded the British Book Awards Newcomer of the Year and the WH Smith People's Choice Award.

<sup>413</sup> Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004), p.14

<sup>414</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 1995), p.9

between Eastern and Western cultures is maintained throughout the text, with Nazneen's frequent, although unreliable memories of 'home,' contrasting with the banality of her life in Tower Hamlets. Her idyllic evocation of the village allows her to momentarily escape the isolation of her present existence, and situates her instead within the idealised community of her lost past. Her life confined within the four walls of her small London flat, Nazneen quickly comes to realise that 'what she missed most' about the past 'was people. Not any people in particular [...] but just people' (p.24). Indeed, it is following the moments where Nazneen's sense of dislocation is at its most stark, that she retreats to the comforting memories of the village, 'drift[ing] off to where she wanted to be, in Gouripur' (p.45).

Nazneen's idealised imagining of 'home', however, is undermined throughout the novel by the unreliable functioning of memory. Just as the authority of Saleem's account in *Midnight's Children* is hindered by the inherent instability of memory, which 'selects eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and [...] creates its own reality'<sup>415</sup>, so too Nazneen's evocation of the village becomes progressively blighted by the passing of time:

It was as if the village was caught up in a giant fisherman's net and she was pulling at the fine mesh with bleeding fingers, squinting into the sun, vision mottled with netting and eyelashes. As the years passed the layers of netting multiplied and she began to rely on a different kind of memory. The memory of things she knew but no longer saw.

As her conscious efforts to capture the essence of the past are more and more inhibited by the obstructive layers of lapsed time, Nazneen's rendering of the village increasingly materialises as a utopian figment of her subconscious imagination, since 'it was only in her sleep that [it] came whole again' (p.217). In highlighting the difficulties inherent to Nazneen's forming a coherent depiction of the village, in other words in outlining the evident impossibility of her faithfully visualising that which 'she knew', Ali seemingly pre-empts the debates that would surround the publication of the novel; that is, the extent to which representations can ever offer authentic, unobscured, reflections of 'reality'.

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<sup>415</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p.211

Portraying an established Muslim community within a post-9/11 climate in which, if the claims outlined by Modood *et al.* are acknowledged, members of the Islamic faith are subject to increased social and political enmity, it is unsurprising that, alongside receiving such widespread institutional acclaim, the publication of *Brick Lane* would provoke such antipathy amongst the British-Bangladeshi community, who in accusing Ali of misrepresentation, suggested that the novel reinforced reductive racial stereotypes. The controversy surrounding the text was reinvigorated in 2006 as plans emerged by Ruby Films to adapt the novel, shooting various scenes on location. Echoing the concerns surrounding its initial publication, Abdus Salique, chair of the Brick Lane Trader's Association and coordinator of the 'Campaign Against Monica Ali's Film *Brick Lane*', condemns the authority of Ali's representation, arguing that 'she has imagined ideas about us in her head. She is not one of us, she has not lived with us, she knows nothing about us, but she has insulted us.' Responding to the suggestion that as a work of fiction, the verisimilitude of *Brick Lane* might not constitute the outright attack on the community of which the novel has been accused, he insists that 'it's not a work of fiction [...] this is all lies.'<sup>416</sup> The tensions generated by the controversy, and made explicit by Salique's condemnation, again serve to reinvigorate debates regarding the function of literature as a mimetic or didactic device. The overt paradox of Salique's assertion, dismissing *Brick Lane* as a work of fiction precisely because its representations are fictional, provokes the need to reassess and redefine specifically what it is that society demands of its literature, and moreover calls attention to the assumed responsibilities and moral obligations placed upon the author.

Furthermore, intrinsic to Salique's condemnation of the novel, and indeed echoed throughout the various campaigns against *Brick Lane*, is the sense that Ali's 'multicultural' background brings to the text a misplaced authority, which effectively functions to authenticate the stereotyped misrepresentation of the community depicted within the novel. Indeed, responding to the protests that surrounded the publication and later adaptation of *Brick Lane*, Sunny Hundal implies that it is precisely their being positioned as 'multicultural' writers that precipitates the increased burden of representation on authors such as Ali. Such writers, he argues, 'are lauded by the chattering classes as being "an authentic new voice of multicultural Britain" before

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<sup>416</sup> Abdus Salique, quoted in 'Local Protests over Brick Lane Film', Richard Lea & Paul Lewis in *Guardian* (July 17, 2006) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/17/film.uk>> (accessed 29.10.08)



being gently pushed off the cliff when there is a protest. Whoops, we never knew he/she was not being authentic, they quietly mutter.<sup>417</sup> Implicit to the condemnation of *Brick Lane*'s stereotyped representation of the British-Bengali community, then, is the similarly prejudicial assumption that as an author whose heritage might broadly be defined as 'multicultural' (Ali, raised in England from the age of three, was born in Dhaka to a Bangladeshi father and English mother), Ali has an ethical obligation to depict marginalised communities faithfully, and indeed, *favourably*; as a 'multicultural author,' there is an increased emphasis placed upon the mimetic and didactic function of her text that is not reflective of the expectations placed upon literature more generally. In a review of Ali's novel that defends the portrayal of the East London Bangladeshi community, Sukhdev Sandhu asks whether 'the public recognition of ethnic communities across the United Kingdom [is] dependent on their valorisation by literary fiction.'<sup>418</sup> That literary fiction might broadly be thought to imbue a form of knowledge that 'enlarges readers' social, historical or philosophical perceptions'<sup>419</sup> is undeniable; however, the extent to which a fictional narrative might inform its readers' perceptions of specific established communities is clearly problematic, and moreover forces a re-examination of the role of literature within contemporary society.

For the most part, perceptions of the novel have moved beyond the expectations of moral didacticism as espoused by the form's progenitors, yet accusations of authors misrepresenting 'real' communities within 'fictional' texts suggest the continued responsibility placed on novelists to represent lived reality faithfully. While such a conclusion is perhaps self-evident, it does require further qualification, and as such we might more accurately surmise that there is an increased responsibility placed on those authors who might be thought to be writing from the margins – broadly speaking, those authors who are not Western, middle-class, white and male – to represent lived reality faithfully. Addressing the 'ecstatic response' to Ali's mapping out of 'a new invisible London' in *Brick Lane*, Sandhu comments that 'it's hard to imagine Notting Hill residents being asked if they consider themselves to have been fairly represented in *London Fields*, or the inhabitants of Chelsea Marina

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<sup>417</sup> Hundal, Sunny. 'End the Brick Lane Brouhaha' in *The Guardian* (July 31, 2006) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/jul/31/whybricklanemustgoahead>> (accessed 24.04.09)

<sup>418</sup> Sukhdev Sandhu, 'Come Hungry, Leave Edgy' in *London Review of Books* (October 9, 2003) <[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n19/sand01\\_html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n19/sand01_html)> (accessed 28.10.08)

<sup>419</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p.12

being questioned about their portrayal by J. G. Ballard as psychosexually troubled paranoiacs.<sup>420</sup> Indeed, while they undoubtedly function at the level of social commentary, such texts are generally consumed and interpreted as works of fiction. As such, although the characters featured within the novels are linked to recognisable geographical locations, their fictionalised manifestation ensures that they are disassociated from the ‘real’ communities that they broadly represent.

Just as Ballard’s *Millennium People* might be thought to offer a parody of the banal lives of Chelsea Marina’s middle-class inhabitants, so Ali’s novel might be interpreted as a satirical portrayal of East End multiculturalism. Certainly, while it is written against a recognisable backdrop, the novel’s status as a fictional text is nonetheless reinforced by Ali’s mode of characterisation which, as many critics have noted, ‘verges on the Dickensian.’<sup>421</sup> Harriet Lane argues that Ali’s portrait of multicultural London never resorts to caricature,<sup>422</sup> yet we might argue that her creations of Chanu and Mrs Islam run dangerously close to being perceived as stock comedic and villainous characters respectively. Moreover, *Brick Lane* resonates with the influences of other literary texts, and so situates itself firmly alongside the novels of Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith and others, in an already established post-migrant tradition. Indeed, in recognising the text’s literary lineage, it becomes possible to trace the basis of Ali’s characterisation back to earlier novels within the tradition (to be explored later in the chapter), rather than to the exploitative caricatures of established communities.

Unlike Ballard’s text, however, the fictional depiction of ‘real’ communities within *Brick Lane* has, for some, taken on an increased significance that has served to problematise the distinction between literary portrayals and those that are literal. Named on Granta’s ‘Best of Young British Novelists’ list some six months prior to her debut novel being printed, it was inevitable that the much-hyped publication of Ali’s *Brick Lane* would attract considerable media attention. Touted by many as the ‘new Zadie Smith’ – a comparison that Ali has been keen to challenge, attributing it to the lazy analyses offered by ‘headline writers’<sup>423</sup> – early reviews justified the premature hype surrounding Ali, as *Brick Lane* was, like *White Teeth*, held up to be a *tour de*

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<sup>420</sup> Sukhdev Sandhu, ‘Come Hungry, Leave Edgy’

<sup>421</sup> Harriet Lane, ‘Ali’s in Wonderland’ in *Observer* (June 1, 2003)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jun/01/fiction.features1>> (accessed 28.10.08)

<sup>422</sup> Ibid

<sup>423</sup> Daley, Paul. ‘East Meets West the Ali Way’ (August 24, 2003)

<<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/08/22/1061529323944.html>> (accessed 02.06.10)

*force* of contemporary multicultural literature; Fareena Alam's praise that the novel offers 'a rare account of the British Bengali diaspora experience' which 'celebrates the humanity and complexity of a community which even Bengalis [...] know so little about'<sup>424</sup> is echoed throughout the early assessments of the text. As the profile of the novel increased, however, so a sense of discontent intensified amongst members of the East End Bangladeshi community that it was seen to portray. Alam goes on to comment that although many of the Bengalis she had spoken to had not actually read the novel, they were angered by Ali's 'insulting remarks about certain segments of the community.'<sup>425</sup> Moreover, in an article published six months following the novel's publication, *The Guardian* revealed how, having shortlisted *Brick Lane* for its Guardian First Book Award, it received an eighteen-page letter from The Greater Sylhet Welfare and Development Council, detailing their specific objections to the text. The article reported how copies of the letter had been sent to John Carey, the chairman of the 2003 Booker Prize judges (an award for which the novel was also shortlisted), and to Ali herself, as a means to apply continued pressure to the publishing industry demanding that the novel be censored. Ostensibly a mouthpiece enabling the concerns of Britain's Bangladeshis to be voiced, the Council 'branded [Ali's] work a "despicable insult" to Bangladeshis living in the area' and, within the letter, outlined 'their objections to the "shameful" way the book depicts the community.'<sup>426</sup> Speaking for the British-Bangladeshi community as a whole, thereby eradicating individual responses to the text under a collective critique, a spokesman for the Council condemned the novel by stating:

We have serious objections to most of the content of this book which is a despicable insult to Bangladeshis at home and abroad. This has been an awful slight on us and people feel very strongly about it. [...] It is a completely stereotypical view of Bangladeshis living in Brick Lane and one we simply do not recognise. The book says we got here by jumping ships and it says we have lice and live like rats in their holes. These comments are simply untrue and hurtful.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Fareena Alam, 'The Burden of Representation' in *Observer* (July 13, 2003) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jul/13/fiction.features>> (accessed 28.10.08)

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>426</sup> Matthew Taylor, 'Brickbats Fly as Community Brands Novel "Despicable"' in *Guardian* (December 3, 2003) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2003/dec/03/books.arts>> (accessed 01.06.10)

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid*

That the anti-Sylheti sentiment voiced by a *fictional* character is seen to be representative of the general outlook of ‘the book’, and by association of the author, is clearly problematic and once again serves to destabilise the distinction between fiction and ‘reality’.

Read in isolation, the specific statements that are the source of the Council’s ire might justifiably warrant the anger felt by the reputedly targeted community; yet one might argue that any written utterance considered outside of its immediate context is susceptible to (mis)interpretations that, having been lifted from ‘the set of presences which organize the moment of its inscription’<sup>428</sup>, cannot be attributed to the author. Furthermore, read within the context of the novel, Chanu’s pejorative remarks towards the Sylheti community function not to reinforce or otherwise validate their negative stereotype, but rather serve to address the intrinsic complexities and contradictions of migrant identity. His condemnation of the community’s apparently self-enforced segregation – ‘they all stick together because they come from the same district [...] and they come to Tower Hamlets and they think they are back in the village’ – ostensibly introduces the debate that is explored throughout the novel: namely, within a ‘multicultural society’ to what extent is assimilation an achievable, or indeed a desirable, outcome? Similarly, his denigration of Sylhetis as being morally and intellectually inferior, although overtly problematic, might be interpreted as being less a slur on the community, and more a reflection of Chanu’s need to establish an identity that is distinct from the stereotyped image prescribed for him by British society: ‘you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan.’ As a means to establish a coherent, positive identity for himself and his family, Chanu effectively situates the Sylhetis as ‘Other’, juxtaposing his self-proclaimed respectability with their peasantry, illiteracy, close-mindedness and lack of ambition (p.28).

The parallels between Chanu’s skewed rationale and the Orientalist discourses that served to justify Western imperialism, should not go unnoticed here. Certainly, the extent to which his conception of self is reliant upon the antithetical construction of the Sylheti as ‘Other’, and indeed the justification he offers for his positioning of their subordinated status, ostensibly mirrors the (prescribed) relationship between the

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<sup>428</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’ in *Margins of Philosophy* tr. Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p.317

Occident and the Orient. That Chanu is simultaneously situated as both perpetrator and victim of a latent Orientalism which continues to pervade contemporary society despite its alleged 'multicultural' outlook, is significant, and his need to be recognised as a distinct individual, rather than dismissed as an anonymous member of a largely homogenous 'clan', would again seem to be suggestive of the complexities of multicultural subjectivity. Indeed, his desire to transcend the transience of his post-migrant identity, to be recognised and have his *individual* identity validated by a wider society, is redolent of earlier fictional explorations of multicultural subjectivity. The presumed failure of his fellow countrymen to validate his existence aligns the characterisation of Chanu with earlier traditions of migrant writing: his spectre-like social presence reminiscent of Ralph Ellison's eponymous *Invisible Man* (1952); and his inherent sense of dislocation recalling the portrayal of Moses in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1952). In evoking these parallels, *Brick Lane*'s position within a continuing tradition of new-post-migrant writing is ostensibly reaffirmed, with Chanu's exasperated monologue functioning as a narrative device that serves to introduce the (multicultural) concerns that are explored throughout the novel. Moreover, the remarks further function to illustrate the pomposity and priggishness of Chanu's character, traits that are gently mocked throughout the narrative. With this in mind, it becomes increasingly difficult to attribute the views of a character that is so palpably stylised, to the opinions of Ali; indeed, that the remarks are uttered by Chanu, effectively serves to undermine any authority they might possess.

Exploring the 'charges' made against Ali that the characters featured within *Brick Lane* are caricatured depictions that are largely 'unrepresentative', Dominic Head argues that 'the question of representation [...] evidently becomes more contentious in the depiction of marginalized ethnic groups, putting a special constraint on the writer who chooses to represent such groups.'<sup>429</sup> Such a claim would appear to be evidently true within the bifurcated post-9/11 landscape, where the latent discourses of Orientalism, seen broadly in the rhetoric of the 'War on Terror', have ostensibly reinvigorated the civilizational divide between East and West; 'the *civilized* world', George W. Bush contends in his 2002 State of the Union Address, 'faces unprecedented dangers.'<sup>430</sup> Within the post-9/11 environment where the 'Other' is

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<sup>429</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*, p.82

<sup>430</sup> George W. Bush, '2002 State of the Union Address' in *Washington Post* (January 29, 2002)

viewed with increasing suspicion and hostility, the responsibility placed upon the author to render the complexities of ‘reality’ into something universally communicable, is intensified. In a study that explores the function of the novel in making intelligible the events of 9/11, Kristiaan Versluys outlines the increasingly complex role of the contemporary author:

The creative imagination is usually associated with a certain power of explanation, a kind of affective or empathic understanding. Writers are supposed to practice imaginative identification, that is, the ability to get into someone else’s skin, to feel, as Keats did, at one even with a sparrow in the gravel. In other words, novelists are supposed to have a special affinity with the Other.<sup>431</sup>

The assumed transcendental qualities ascribed to the author by wider society go some way to explain why, following 9/11, the Western media turned to its novelists to translate the incomprehensibility of the events; yet the increased onus placed on novelists to represent and unravel reality faithfully, clearly problematises their role as writers of *fiction*, and subsequently leaves them vulnerable to the forms of criticism that have been levelled against Ali.

The extent to which an author might be challenged regarding the authenticity of their characterisation, however, is not wholly dependent upon their subject matter. Amis’s troubled engagement with Islam aside, the fictional portrayal of ethnic communities by contemporary white, Western writers has gone largely undisputed, with even the hackneyed portrayal of Islamic fundamentalism featured in contemporary texts, such as Sebastian Faulks’ *A Week in December* (2009) and John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), barely causing a ripple of discontent amongst Muslim communities. Rather as Sandhu and others have suggested, the ‘special constraint’ placed upon contemporary authors seems applicable only to those novelists that themselves are seen to be representative of the marginalised community portrayed. Gautam Malkani, author of the 2006 novel *Londonstani*, surmises that ‘if you’re an

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<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm>> (accessed 09.06.10)

[my italics]

<sup>431</sup> Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, pp.150-151

ethnic novelist from a small community, there [is] extra criteria on you to be authentic and representative in a way that other white novelists don't have.'<sup>432</sup>

As the furore surrounding its original publication was reinvigorated as plans to film the novel on location were revealed, such a conclusion certainly appears to be verifiable in the case of *Brick Lane* where Ali's 'multicultural' heritage brings to the text an expected level of authenticity that would be absent had an author from a different background written it. While clearly contentious, such a belief is corroborated by Germaine Greer's much-disputed article published in *The Guardian* in 2006. Aligning her sympathies with those protesters constituting the 2006 'Campaign Against Monica Ali's Film *Brick Lane*', the source of Greer's ire is ostensibly that Ali had the audacity to create a fictional representation of an established community ('what hurts is precisely that [...] she has dared to create them'), whilst at the same time situating herself as a 'proto-Bengali writer with a Muslim name.'<sup>433</sup> She goes on to suggest that Ali's invocation of the Brick Lane Bengali community exploits established stereotypes as a means to create a caricatured depiction that is palatable to its intended (non-Asian) readership – interestingly, Greer's criticisms parallel the critique of Kureishi's fiction as outlined above by Ranasinha. That the crux of her tirade, and indeed that of the Brick Lane campaigners<sup>434</sup>, rests upon the fictive creation of the novel's characters (a curious charge to wage against a work of literary *fiction*), is clearly problematic; as is Greer's associated inference that in writing the novel, Ali should have disowned her Bengali past, writing instead under an innocuous pseudonym that disclaims any assumed authority she may have projected over the portrayal of the community.

While the argument presented is highly contentious it is significant in that Greer's conclusions, and the inherent 'double racism'<sup>435</sup> that forms the logic of her argument, invite us to draw parallels between her condemnation of *Brick Lane* and her

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<sup>432</sup> Gautam Malkani, quoted in 'End the Brick Lane Brouhaha', Sunny Hundal

<sup>433</sup> Germaine Greer, 'Reality Bites' in *Guardian* (July 24, 2006)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/jul/24/culture.books>> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>434</sup> Abdus Salique, coordinator of the campaign and chairman of the Brick Lane Trader's Association, responded to suggestions that the contents of *Brick Lane*, being a fictional text, could not constitute an attack on the community by arguing that 'it's not a fiction book [...] This is all lies.' (Quoted in 'Local Protests over Brick Lane Film', Richard Lea & Paul Lewis in *Guardian* (July 17, 2006) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/17/film.uk>> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>435</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'Brickbats Fly over Brick Lane' (Letters) in *Guardian* (July 29, 2006) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/29/comment.letters>> (accessed 28.10.08)

controversial stance during the Rushdie Affair.<sup>436</sup> In acknowledging the parallel, it becomes clear that, despite claims to the contrary, the increased ‘burden of representation’ felt by multicultural authors is not a phenomenon specific to post-9/11 fiction. Indeed, in situating *Brick Lane* within a continuing tradition of ‘post-migrant’ writing, it becomes evident that the debates surrounding the text’s (mis)representation of the Muslim community are not unique to the novel, but rather suggest an exacerbation of already existing tensions.

Although the *Brick Lane* protests of 2003 and 2006 were muted in comparison, the frisson of discontent generated by the novel’s representation of the Asian community is evocative of the furore that accompanied the publication of *The Satanic Verses*; and while the more recent demonstrations lack the global impact and iconography of the former – it is doubtful whether scenes depicting the *Brick Lane* protests will become a staple in future post-migrant texts in the way that the Bradford Book burnings have – that the comparison is made at all is significant, and raises important questions regarding the socio-cultural contexts in which the novels were received. Published fifteen years apart, Ali’s *Brick Lane* is by no means the first novel written since *The Satanic Verses* that, penned by a ‘multicultural’ author, offers a fictional portrayal of immigrant life in London; yet it is exceptional in the manner in which, similarly to Rushdie’s text, its publication provoked such high-profile debates, questioning both the function of literature within contemporary society, and the assumed authority of ethnic authors to depict (faithfully) marginalised communities within their novels.

Of the *Satanic Verses* Affair, Rushdie comments that it was ‘at bottom an argument about who should have the power over the grand narrative, the Story of Islam’<sup>437</sup>, and, as previously discussed, we might similarly contend that the controversy evoked by *Brick Lane* was essentially fuelled by debates over whether

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<sup>436</sup> Indeed, the article would reawaken the dormant hostility between Rushdie and Greer, with her accusation that Ali, being ‘on the near side of British culture, not far from the middle’, had ‘forgotten her Bengali, which she would not have done if she had wanted to remember it’ (‘Reality Bites’), resonating with the acerbity in which she refused to defend Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses* in the wake of his receiving a *fatwa* shortly after the novel’s publication. In much the same way as she challenges Ali’s authority to represent a community of which she ostensibly has tenuous links, so Rushdie recalls how at the height of the controversy surrounding his novel, Greer, in justifying her reluctance to support the author, denounced his cultural heritage, describing him as ‘an Englishman with dark skin’ (quoted from “‘You Sanctimonious Philistine’ – Rushdie v Greer, the Sequel”, Paul Lewis in *Guardian* (July 29, 2006) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/jul/29/topstories3.books>> (accessed 10.06.10).

<sup>437</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘One Thousand Days in a Balloon’ in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (1991; London: Penguin Books, 1992), p.432



Ali, as a British writer of Bangladeshi heritage, possessed the sufficient authority to (accurately) portray the British-Bengali community. That novels written in the interim years by authors such as Kureishi and Zadie Smith were not, despite similarities in approach and characterisation, subject to the scrutiny that *Brick Lane* was, is significant, and is perhaps suggestive of a shift in cultural mood precipitated by the alleged demonization of the Muslim following 9/11. Certainly, the anti-Sylheti sentiment voiced by Chanu, and singled out as being the primary source of the novel's controversy, is not unique to *Brick Lane*. The incredulity expressed by Chanu regarding the apparent inability of the English to distinguish between him and 'the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads' (p.34), for instance, has clear parallels with Margaret's anxieties in Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), that there 'be no confusion between' her Bombay-born husband Haroon and 'the swarms of Indian peasants who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and of whom it was said they were not familiar with cutlery and certainly not with toilets.'<sup>438</sup> Moreover, the need to distinguish specific individuals from the homogenising stereotype that might otherwise define them, and thereby establish a hierarchically-structured perception of migrant identity, is further evident in Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), through Archie's insistence that Bangladeshi-born Samad and his wife Alsana are 'not *those* kind of Indians.'<sup>439</sup> In drawing such parallels, it becomes increasingly difficult to justify the criticism levelled at Ali for her portrayal of the British-Asian community, which is clearly suggestive of earlier representations within the tradition. Published in 2003, might the intense reaction incited by *Brick Lane*, then, be attributed solely to the apparent transition in perceptions of the Muslim following the events of 9/11? If so, to what extent might such a shift constitute the emergence of an altered global mood?

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<sup>438</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p.24

<sup>439</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p.54

Further comparisons between *White Teeth* and *The Buddha of Suburbia* will be explored within the concluding chapter of this study.

#### 4.4 ‘The Start of the Madness’? *Brick Lane*, 9/11 and the Muslim

Without doubt, a British Islam is emerging. It remains to be seen whether it will be in harmony with the world in which it finds itself, or if it rejects and repels it. [...] The future of Islam is being shaped now.<sup>440</sup>

As Ed Husain and others have argued, the events of 9/11 have thrown into sharp relief the liberal expectations of Western multiculturalism. The apparent resurgence of a latent form of Orientalism, which designates the Muslim as ‘chimerical, monstrous Other’, has functioned, for many, to define the contemporary moment as a period of transition for Western conceptions of Islam. Comparing the emergent post-9/11 mood with the period immediately following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Modood suggests that ‘the politics of being a Muslim in Britain and the West has, inevitably, come to be dominated by 9/11 and its aftermath’, with Muslim communities publicly asserting their identities ‘even more so’ than at the time of the Rushdie Affair.<sup>441</sup> The acknowledgement of such a claim may go some way to explain the criticism directed towards Ali’s novel; subject to both the increasingly hostile gaze of the West and a reinvigorated latent Orientalism, the protests surrounding *Brick Lane* might be interpreted as Muslim communities challenging dominant perceptions of Islam through publicly asserting contrary identities.

Critiquing the negative representation of Bengali communities within Tower Hamlets, *Brick Lane*’s Karim suggests that the media are complicit in engendering and maintaining the myth of the disaffected Muslim youth who, unacknowledged by wider British society, turns to gang culture as means to assert an identity. He declares: ‘all these people going around talking about gangs, all they’re doing is feeding the racists. The newspapers love it. But the truth is there are no gangs’ (p.407). A similar logic can be applied to the protests surrounding the publication and filming of Ali’s novel. A ‘media storm-in-a-teacup,’<sup>442</sup> much of the substance of the protests consists of the *expectation* that the novel, written within a post-9/11 climate by a young British-Bengali author who has allegedly forgotten her heritage, will inevitably offer depictions of the Brick Lane Muslim community which will be at best archetypal, and

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<sup>440</sup> Ed Husain, *The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside and Why I Left* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p.286

<sup>441</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*, p.199

<sup>442</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*, p.76

at worst ‘shamefully’ unrepresentative. Certainly, as many of the accompanying journalistic articles and reports corroborate, few protesters had actually read the novel, but were rather either ‘relying on what the protesters say’<sup>443</sup>, or else forming their opinions on the basis of the criticisms outlined by the media. The newspapers clearly did ‘love it’ but, as an analysis of the characterisation will show, ‘the truth is’ that *Brick Lane*’s fictionalisation of British-Muslims is largely determined by the exploitation of existing models as featured within the post-migrant tradition, and as such, there is very little in its portrayal that is uniquely *specific* to the novel itself.

As suggested above, *Brick Lane*, reflective of the fiction constituting the new post-migrant tradition, is a highly intertextual novel that, in a similar way to *The Black Album* and *White Teeth*, draws upon the established models and concerns of migrant experience, as outlined within both the post-migrant tradition and postcolonial theory, as a means to knowingly interpret the interpretations of British-Muslim identity. As previously discussed, Nazneen adheres to the archetype of the dislocated migrant, who is both disconnected from British culture and from the past life that she idealises: awaking from a dream of her life in Gouripur, ‘she knew that where she wanted to go was not a different place but a different time. She was free to wish it but it would never be’ (p.45). Moreover, her inability to perceive a coherent sense of self is redolent of the inherent fragmentation that defines migrant identity, and is saliently encapsulated as she attempts to catch the image of herself in a mirror. Trying on a pair of Chanu’s trousers – thus experimenting with fashioning a new liberal ‘British’ self – Nazneen finds that ‘to see herself she had to stand on the bed and look in the curly-edged dressing-table mirror’, but even then ‘she could see only her legs.’ Unable to see her complete reflection, she manipulates her body into a number of twisted positions, and so constructs an image of herself that is formed by the accumulation of captured fragments (p.141). Her inability to see herself ‘whole’, is redolent of Doctor Aziz’s medical assessment of Naseem – the parallels in name should also not go unnoticed – in *Midnight’s Children*. Instructed by her father to conduct his examination of her through a sheet with a hole exposing ‘the required segment’ of her body, ‘so gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in

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<sup>443</sup> Jubeada Begum, quoted in ‘Novelists Hit Back at Brick Lane Protesters’, Richard Lea in *The Guardian* (July 31, 2006) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/31/salmanrushdie>> (accessed 29.10.08)

his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts.<sup>444</sup> Like Aziz's imagined construction of Naseem, so Nazneen's conception of self is necessarily ruptured and incomplete.

Furthermore, evocative of earlier fictional and theoretical imaginings of the migrant, Nazneen's identity is characterised by an essential liminality. Throughout the narrative, her subjectivity is shown to be negotiated and constrained by her extraction from society: 'she saw that she was trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity' (p.76). On leaving the confines of her apartment and venturing down Brick Lane alone, her social invisibility is emphasised and becomes akin to that of Ellison's protagonist. Walking amongst the people of Brick Lane 'without a coat, without a suit, without a white face', Nazneen quickly realises that she can traverse the bustling space of the city largely unnoticed: 'They could not see her anymore than she could see God. They knew that she existed (just as she knew that He existed) but unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her' (p.56). Similarly to Selvon's Moses and Kureishi's Shahid, the transience of Nazneen's identity is further determined by her existing between two cultures, but belonging to neither. Throughout the novel she is caught in a tension between remaining loyal to her 'village' identity – both Chanu and Karim are attracted to her being an authentic 'girl from the village: totally unspoilt' (p.23) – and wanting to integrate into Western society.

Chanu's identity is likewise determined by transience. As the narrative progresses and he becomes increasingly disillusioned with his life in London, he comes to realise that assimilation is both synonymous with cultural sacrifice and moreover is always an incomplete process. With his dreams of promotion being continually overlooked and his subsequent employment defined by his being slighted by both employers and clients (there was in the world a great shortage of respect and Chanu was among the famished', p.203), Chanu's ambitions of forging a secure life in London for his family are quelled, and with the realisation that successful integration into British culture will always remain beyond his reach, his ensuing relationship with London is defined by a reverse-colonialism:

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<sup>444</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, pp.23-25

You see, all my life I have struggled. And for what? What good has it done? I have finished with all that. [...] You see, when the English went to our country, they did not go to stay. They went to make money, and the money they made, they took it out of the country. They never left home. Mentally. Just taking money out. And that is what I am doing now. What else can you do? (p.214)

Chanu's struggle to assimilate is clearly reflective of the concerns of first generation migrants, as outlined above by Abbas, and thus the introduction of Karim to the narrative, a young British-born radical Muslim, functions to demonstrate the generational shift in the construction and concerns of contemporary migrant identity. Certainly, the apparent juxtaposition between the attitudes of Chanu and those embraced by Karim, replicates the disparate construction of Muslim identity as depicted by Parvez and Farid in *My Son the Fanatic*. Although wary of suggesting that a fictional narrative might be reflective of a lived social reality, the shift in concern seen in *Brick Lane* parallels the heightened complexities of migrant identity emergent within contemporary, post-Rushdie society. Nazneen observes that 'while her husband talked less and less, Karim talked more and more' (p.407), and certainly, as the novel progresses, the focus of the narrative shifts from interrogating the concerns of integration and assimilation (Chanu) to exploring the complex and contradictory politics of contemporary post-migrant identity (Karim); thus reflecting the alleged shift in perceptions of the Muslim in British society, as precipitated by the Rushdie Affair.

Furthermore, just as both Nazneen and Chanu are ostensibly conceived within a continuing post-migrant tradition, so too the novel's portrayal of Karim is indebted to earlier depictions of the young Islamic radical. Similarly to the depictions of the dislocated migrant that pervade the narratives of the post-migrant tradition, so Karim's identity is defined by an unsettling rootlessness. Nazneen reflects early in the narrative how the certainty in his posturing projects a confident sense of self that defies the assumed liminality of his hybrid identity. Indeed, we might argue that much of Nazneen's attraction to Karim lies in his possessing that which 'she and Hasina and Chanu sought but could not find. [...] A place in the world' (p.264). As the narrative progresses, however, Karim's confident façade begins to slip, and his inherent sense of dislocation emerges, to the extent that when Nazneen latterly reflects upon their

relationship, she concludes: ‘she saw only what she wanted to see. Karim did not have his place in the world. That was why he defended it’ (pp.448-449). Like *The Black Album*’s Chad, then, Karim’s turn to radical Islam might be interpreted as an attempt to assert a coherent identity. Indeed, just as Deedee recalls how, during his teenage years, Chad experimented with different identities in order to ‘find a place’, so Karim remembers how when he was growing up, his Bangladeshi heritage was sacrificed as a means to establish a socially validated sense of self:

When I was a little kid [...] if you wanted to be cool you had to be something else – a bit white, a bit black, a bit something. Even when it all took off, bhangra and all that, it was Punjabi, Pakistani, giving it all the attitude. It weren’t us, was it? If you wanted to be cool, you couldn’t just be yourself. Bangladeshi (p.263).

The earnestness in which Karim embraces radical Islam, offers a clear parallel with Kureishi’s imagining of Farid. While his relationship with Nazneen challenges his puritanical rendering of Islam, his sense of reclaiming a lost past from which he is entirely disconnected, is evocative of Farid’s intransigent conversion to Islamism. Ostensibly deconstructing his hybrid identity as a British-Muslim, his uncompromising rendering of Islam is symbolised by Nazneen’s adding of ‘radical’ to her increasing English lexicon: ‘she heard it often enough from Karim that she came to understand it and know that it was simply another word for “right”’ (p.261). Moreover, similarly to Farid, Karim’s idealisation of the purity of Islam and condemnation of the inherent corruption of British society, is undermined by his being wholly dislocated from the former and inextricably connected to the latter. Nazneen, effectively revoking the connection forged by their assumed shared sense of exclusion from British society, emphasises the sense of cultural disparity between herself and Karim, realising that as he ‘had never even been to Bangladesh’, he was ‘born a foreigner’ (p.448).

As I have sought to demonstrate, the positioning of *Brick Lane* within a continuing new post-migrant tradition suggests that the tensions inherent to the novel’s representation of the Muslim are an exacerbation of already existing, pre-9/11, concerns. In assessing the extent to which the events of 9/11 might have precipitated a noticeable shift in perceptions of the Muslim, however, the novel emerges as a

particularly interesting text, since Ali's rendering of the London Bengali community traverses 2001, and thus offers fictionalised depictions of the Muslim both within a pre- and post-9/11 context. While we might contend that post-9/11 anxieties pervade the narrative throughout, within the chronology of the narrative, the events of September 11 appear approximately three-quarters of the way through. 'The world has gone mad,' utters Chanu as he and Nazneen stand mesmerised, eyes fixated on their television screen as they watch the events of September 11 unfold before them. 'This is the start of the madness' (pp.365-366). The extent to which the remaining quarter of the narrative reflects such 'madness' is, however, debateable.

There is much evidence to substantiate Chanu's ominous sense of foreboding. The narrative recounts how 'a pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate', manifesting itself in *hijabs* being pulled off and Razia, wearing her Union Jack sweatshirt, being spat at (p.368). Moreover, Karim's affected style fashioned after 9/11 ('the gold necklace had vanished; the jeans, shirts and trainers went as well,' p.376), is reflective of the public reassertion of an unfettered Muslim identity and the increased commitment to the Islamic cause that more intensively defines the meetings of the Bengal Tigers. Furthermore, the shift in tone of the meetings more intensively reflects the apparent transition in Western perceptions of Islam from the moderation of Chanu to the radicalism of Karim. As the Bengal Tigers convene following 9/11, such a shift in mood is made explicit: 'there was none of the family atmosphere of the previous meeting. Most of those gathered were young men' (p.411).

There is, however, a sense in which the cultural transition incited by 9/11 amounts, within the novel, to little more than the intensification of a residual mood. Insofar as it being conceived as novelistic device that frames the subsequent narrative, the events of 9/11 actually have little impact upon the structure of the plot itself: Chanu's disillusionment with life in London is well established prior to 9/11; his decision to return 'home' to ensure that his children are not 'spoiled' is an utterance repeated and reaffirmed throughout the narrative; the process of self-liberation that will enable Nazneen to forge an identity that is independent from Fate, Chanu and Karim, is arguably instigated by her affair with Karim, rather than her reactions to 9/11; and the sense of cultural 'Otherness' felt by the Tower Hamlets community is evident in the pre-9/11 meetings of the Bengali Tigers. In considering *Brick Lane* as 'a post-9/11 novel', Head highlights the 'impressive' manner in which the events of

September 11 'are related to the lives of the characters, and [to] the direction of Ali's plot.' Drawing a parallel between Nazneen's 'earlier fascination' with the story of a woman who had, allegedly, committed suicide by jumping from the window of her flat, and her being mesmerised by the image of workers jumping from the burning Twin Towers, he argues that 'the novel's plot *turns* on the events of 9/11.'<sup>445</sup> That the nuances in plot that Head highlights as having been explicitly precipitated by 9/11 have their genesis within the pre-9/11-section of the narrative (namely, the division in 'the radical Muslim organization' that culminates in the violent conflict between the two opposing 'camps'; Chanu's determination to return to Bangladesh; and Nazneen's 'new mood of self-assertion'<sup>446</sup>), suggests that the events of 9/11 function within the novel to enable the earlier concerns of the plot to reach their logical conclusion. As such it might be argued that the events of September 11 do not *determine* the final orientation of Ali's plot, but rather that the plot's direction follows the path mapped out in the earlier sections of the text. For Ali's fictionalised British-Bengali community, then, the events of 9/11 precipitate an exacerbation of already existing concerns; and moreover, paralleling its function within the structure of the novel itself, the post-9/11 mood serves as a backdrop to the lives of the depicted Muslim community that functions to continually reinforce their already-marginalised status.

## **4.5 Radical Fictions: The Fundamentalist in Post-9/11 Literature**

### **4.5.1 The 'Real' Fundamentalist**

Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.<sup>447</sup>

As I have suggested and sought to demonstrate throughout this chapter, the character of the Islamic fundamentalist is not unique to post-9/11 fiction; rather, as the analyses offered suggest, the figure is conceived within an ongoing post-migrant tradition. The manifestation of the 'real' fundamentalist within fiction, and indeed the critical responses to it, are crucial to considerations of the extent to which the events of 9/11

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<sup>445</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*, pp.89-90 [My italics]

<sup>446</sup> Ibid, p.90

<sup>447</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* tr. Sheila Faria Glaser (1981; Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.19



might have provoked a cultural shift. While many of the archetypes outlined seamlessly traverse the assumed cultural transition precipitated by 9/11, this specific portrayal, evident also in DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), is ostensibly both generated by, and problematised within the post-9/11 landscape. That the depiction essentially deconstructs the boundaries between 'reality' and 'fiction' suggests a more complex politics of representation, and reinvigorates the perennial debate over the function of literature and the responsibilities that society places upon its authors.

Amis's 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta', first published in *The New Yorker* in April 2006, offers a fictional imagining of the last few hours of Muhammad Atta, prior to him piloting American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Much of the criticism directed at the text has been concerned with the manner in which Amis plays with the tension between reality and fiction. Indeed, the juxtaposition is evident immediately, with the overly stylised descriptions of Atta's lodgings ('this place was ponderous and labyrinthine, and as elderly as most of its clientele [...] the padded nylon quilt as weighty as a lead vest') contrasted with the prefatorial statement lifted from *The 9/11 Commission Report*: 'No physical, documentary, or analytical evidence provides a convincing explanation of why [Muhammad] Atta and [Abdulaziz al-] Omari drove to Portland, Maine, from Boston on the morning of September 10, only to return to Logan on Flight 5930 on the morning of September 11.'<sup>448</sup> From the outset, then, the text is positioned as a fictional account that, in portraying the undocumented movements of Atta, effectively presents a more comprehensive 'explanation' of his motives than reality can offer.

Clearly, the fictional portrayal of 'real' individuals is not a motif unique to contemporary literature. Indeed, one might argue that Amis's reimagining of Atta is firmly based within the continuing postmodern tradition of historiographic metafiction. As such, his rendering of Atta should be no more problematic than, for instance, Jeanette Winterson's interpretation of Napoleon in *The Passion* (1987). Indeed, embedded in Winterson's novel, both through implication and in actual text, is an assurance which resonates throughout Amis's account: 'I'm telling you stories. Trust me.'<sup>449</sup> The inherent contradiction contained within the statement both destabilises the distinction between 'Truth' and fiction, and furthermore emphasises,

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<sup>448</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' in *The Second Plane. September 11: 2001-2007* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p.95

<sup>449</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.5

as discussed previously, the assumed authority of the author as translator of reality. An obvious dissimilarity between the representations offered within the texts, however, is the chronological gap between the real existence of the individuals and their fictionalised manifestation. For some critics, herein lies the problem of Amis's portrayal of Atta.

In his critique of 'The Last Days of Mohammad Atta', George Szirtes discusses the implications of portraying an historical event within a fictional narrative. While acknowledging that the fabrication of reality is a prerequisite of fiction, he argues that the piece is poorly conceived and fundamentally unconvincing. He explains, however, that the story is unbelievable not due to the improbability of Atta's characterisation, but rather because Amis, who he likens to a 'boy who rushes in to grab the best seat in front of the TV', fails to take into account the 'necessary historical process [...] that has to take place before life [...] can become fiction.'<sup>450</sup> For Szirtes, the temporal proximity of Amis's fictional portrayal to Atta's actual manifestation is such, that the character within the short story is neither satisfactorily authentic nor adequately fictionalised. Szirtes fails to trust Amis precisely because he is telling stories; or rather, more accurately, because the stories that he tells are too firmly embedded within the contemporary consciousness.

'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' was republished in Amis's collection *The Second Plane. September 11: 2001-2007* (2008), alongside one other short story (narrated by one of the 'doubles' of a fictionalised Middle-Eastern despot) and a series of essays and journalistic pieces responding to the events of 9/11. The collection was generally received poorly, with many reviewers voicing similar concerns to Szirtes: Sarfraz Manzoor is unable to withhold his chagrin at Amis's 'hasty research' and subsequently positions him as 'a good example of somebody who could have maybe had a literary challenge, but [...] didn't rise to the occasion'<sup>451</sup>; while William Dalrymple argues that Amis's haste to catalogue his views and his apparent unwillingness to try to understand the complexities of Islamic culture, results in 'a book that is not just wilfully ignorant, a triumph of style over knowledge, but that, for all its panache and gloss, is at its heart disturbingly bigoted.'<sup>452</sup> While such critique is

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<sup>450</sup> George Szirtes, 'Martin Amis: The Second Plane' (January 3, 2009)

<<http://georgeszirtes.blogspot.com/2009/01/martin-amis-second-plane.html>> (accessed 20.11.09)

<sup>451</sup> Sarfraz Manzoor, *Newsnight Review* (January 25, 2008)

<sup>452</sup> William Dalrymple, 'The Second Plane by Martin Amis' in *The Sunday Times* (January 27, 2008)

justifiably warranted – Amis’s own conviction in the fundamental irrationality of religion is such that the collection offers no representation of moderate Islam – it is interesting that the reviews themselves make contentious claims relating to the function of literature and the expectations that society places upon the author, as much as the actual text itself. Szirtes’ proposal, of a ‘necessary historical process’ is perhaps commonsensical, yet as an implementable practice, it is clearly problematic and nebulously conceived. How much time needs to pass before ‘real’ events can be fictionalised? Is it a universal process, or is the necessary passing of time correlative to the nature of the event? Similarly, Manzoor’s concerns about the collection provoke questions relating to the necessary mimetic function of literature. His criticism of Amis’s ‘hasty research’ blurs the distinction between reality and fiction, instead suggesting that the latter be determined by a faithful reconstruction of the former.

Clearly debates relating to the ‘correct’ formula that literary texts should follow are not unique to the contemporary landscape. As the responses to Amis’s fictionalisation of Atta suggest, however, following the events of 9/11, the relationship between reality and fiction becomes increasingly complex, and subsequently, a greater emphasis is placed upon the (assumed) ethical and social responsibilities of the author as purveyor of ‘Truth’. In his study *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), Said suggests that towards the end of the twentieth century, the role of the author becomes increasingly conflated with that of the intellectual, which he perceives as being defined by their presenting ‘alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity and mission.’<sup>453</sup> In seeking to fictionalise the events of September 11 from the perspective of Atta, and therefore present an alternative 9/11 narrative, Amis ostensibly encapsulates the hybrid image of the contemporary author as envisaged by Said; yet we might argue that it is precisely Amis’s fulfilment of this role that provokes much of the criticism directed towards him. In presenting the events of 9/11 from a perspective that is contrary to the ‘official’ narrative, Amis depicts an alternate ‘reality’ that can never be historically verified. Moreover, in detailing the minutiae of Atta’s preparation on the morning of September 11, from slipping on a ‘leaking

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<[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article3245467.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article3245467.ece)> (accessed 20.11.09)

<sup>453</sup> Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p.141

shampoo sachet' and falling in the shower, to cutting his lower lip whilst shaving, Amis essentially makes human that which is viewed as reprehensibly alien, and therefore beyond representation (pp.96-99). Clearly, with Said's conception of the author in mind, it becomes difficult to qualify the criticisms levelled specifically at the authenticity of Amis's portrayal. The text is essentially 'unbelievable' because, in stark contradistinction to the playing out of the events of 9/11 to a global audience, the actions and motivations of the terrorists prior to the attacks remain largely inaccessible, and thus external to the 'official' narrative. We might argue, then, that the criticisms directed towards 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' are suggestive of a shift in both the socio-cultural expectations of the author and of the function of literature. Indeed, Said's imagining of the author as purveyor of alternate realities is here undermined, as literary value is synonymous with mimetic authenticity. Certainly, the text and the reviews it generated, provoke considerations relating to the difficulties faced by the author writing after 9/11 in depicting the figure of the fundamentalist. To what extent is it possible for fictional texts to offer 'authentic' portrayals of Islamic radicals – i.e. depictions that adhere to the associated profiling in 'official' narratives – without the author seeking recourse to reductive stereotypes? Moreover, in seeking to portray a belief system that is broadly beyond the comprehension of Western rationality, to what extent is it possible to portray the fundamentalist without resorting to the uncompromising dichotomy of 'them' and 'us'?

In his review of *The Second Plane*, Tim Adams critiques the 'unhesitating "us" and "them" in Amis's characterisation' of the post-9/11 climate, suggesting that 'while we in the West are individuated, they, over there, seldom are.'<sup>454</sup> Certainly, Amis's reductive depiction of Atta is ostensibly founded upon the assumptions of a latent Orientalism. In representing Atta as an Islamic fundamentalist who, paradoxically, is averse to religious doctrine, Amis effectively emphasises the irrationality of the Other. For Amis, the motivations behind Atta's involvement in 'the Planes Operation' is reduced to the inherent polarity of relations between East and West:

Muhammad Atta was not religious; he was not even especially political. He had allied himself with militants because jihad was, by many magnitudes, the

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<sup>454</sup> Tim Adams, 'Amis's War on Terror by Other Means' in *Observer* (January 13, 2008) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jan/13/politics.martinamis>> (accessed 20.11.09)

most charismatic idea of his generation. [...] If you took away all the rubbish about faith, then fundamentalism suited his character, and with an almost sinister precision (p.101).

In oxymoronicly portraying Atta as an Islamic atheist, Amis effectively reinforces the stereotype of the ‘irrational, depraved (fallen)’ Other.<sup>455</sup> Renouncing both religious dogma and political ideology, the motivating force driving Atta is cryptically referred to throughout the text as ‘the core reason.’ Aligned with Gould’s theorising of ‘meaningless violence’, it is only towards the end of the narrative that the meaning of the phrase is explained:

The core reason was of course all the killing – all the putting to death. Not the crew, not the passengers, not the office workers in the Twin Towers, not the cleaners and the caterers, not the men of the NYPD and the FDNY. He was thinking of the war, the wars, the war-cycles that would flow from this day. [...] Here was the primordial secret. No longer closely guarded – no longer well kept. Killing was divine delight (p.122).

For Manzoor, in depicting Atta as a non-believer, Amis projects his own beliefs, regarding the inherent irrationality of religion, onto the fundamentalist. He argues that ‘Muhammad Atta was a Muslim, he was a believer, but Martin Amis cannot obviously imagine somebody being a believer, therefore he makes Muhammad Atta an unbeliever.’<sup>456</sup> For Manzoor, the obvious projection of Amis’s own anti-religious bias on to Atta, perfectly encapsulates the hasty research and apparent reluctance displayed by Amis to interrogate and comprehend the nuances of Islam, that characterises the short story specifically and the collection more generally.

The parallel between Amis and his fictionalised depiction of Atta is not limited to their shared antipathy to organised religion: Atta’s rumination that ‘whatever else terrorism had achieved in the past few decades, it had certainly brought about a net increase in world boredom’ (p.108) is reproduced in Amis’s contention that ‘the age of terror [...] will also be remembered as the age of boredom. Not the kind of boredom that afflicts the blasé and the effete, but a superboredom, rounding out and

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<sup>455</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1991; London: Penguin, 1995), p.40

<sup>456</sup> Sarfraz Manzoor, *Newsnight Review* (January 25, 2008)

complementing the superterror of suicide-mass murder.’<sup>457</sup> Rather than suggesting, like Manzoor and many other critics, that the element of ‘self-projection’ inherent to the characterisation of Atta epitomises the author’s refusal to engage with Islam beyond the limits of his own illiberal comprehension, Versluys argues that the evident parallels serve to exemplify the interdependent relationship of the Western individual with the Other. In his analysis of the short story and its ostensible contribution to the post-9/11 canon, Versluys concludes that ‘even a strenuous exercise in absolute “othering” bears the marks of ineluctable reciprocity and human interdependence.’<sup>458</sup> Clearly, such interdependence is akin to the relationship between the West and the Orient as explored in Said’s *Orientalism*,<sup>459</sup> and as such Amis’s portrayal of Atta goes some way to substantiate those suggestions attesting to the resurgence of a latent Orientalism within the post-9/11 climate.<sup>460</sup>

As the text draws to a close with America 11 striking the North Tower and Atta’s protracted death (‘by the time the last second arrived, the first second seemed as far away as childhood’, p.123), the narrative is effectively reopened, with the last sentence repeating the first: ‘On September 11, 2001, he opened his eyes at 4 a.m., in Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta’s last day began’ (p.124). With Amis’s anti-theological bias in mind, it is unlikely that the circularity of the text functions to align it with religious parable (the sinner constantly reliving their earthly sins in hell); we might instead argue that Amis’s refusal to offer textual resolution is reflective of the inevitable cultural bifurcation that, following 9/11, ensures that comprehension of the Other remains perpetually beyond the grasp of the West.

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<sup>457</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The Age of Horrorism in *Observer* (September 10, 2006) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/sep/10/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety1>> (accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>458</sup> Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p.163

<sup>459</sup> Said introduces the study by emphasising the interdependent nature of the relationship, by asserting that ‘the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience’ (pp.1-2)

<sup>460</sup> On the other hand, however, we might argue that the ‘ineluctable reciprocity’ intrinsic to his portrayal of Atta is evocative of the theories of ‘species consciousness’ that Amis argues are essential to post-9/11 society (as explored in the previous chapter). Just as Amis suggests that following the events of September 11 there is a necessity to recognise that which we have in common – ‘something over and above nationalisms, blocs, religions, ethnicities’ – so in drawing parallels between himself and his portrayal of Atta, he effectively emphasises the residual human connection that is concealed by the overwhelming abhorrence of Atta’s actions.

#### 4.5.2 The ‘Ambiguous’ Fundamentalist

Responding to Amis’s claims of an emergent crisis in representation precipitated by the events of September 11<sup>461</sup>, Pankaj Mishra considers the specific difficulties inherent to the post-9/11 imagining of the fundamentalist:

If inviting terrorists into the democratic realm of fiction was never less than risky, it is now further complicated by the new awareness of mayhem they cause in actuality. Their novelist-host has to overcome much fear and revulsion in order to take seriously murderous passions aimed at his own society. Sympathy often breaks down, and hasty research reduces individuals as well as movements to stereotypical motivations.<sup>462</sup>

For Mishra, the ‘hasty research’ evidenced in the texts of Amis, Updike and DeLillo, results in the depiction of ‘identikit’ fundamentalists which, while recognisable, lack credibility and instead reinforce the reductive stereotypes on which they are based.

Sebastian Faulks’ imagining of Hassan in his recent novel *A Week in December* (2009) might also be added to the expanding list of clichéd depictions. The novel features a split narrative that follows the actions of seven, seemingly disconnected, individuals over a seven-day period in London. In his review of the novel, Justin Cartwright notes the text’s ambition, suggesting that it aspires to be, amongst other things, ‘a state-of-the-nation book, a satirical comedy of metropolitan literary life, a sweeping, Dickensian look at contemporary London [and] a serious examination of Islam and the reasons for radicalism among young Muslims.’ While he describes the novel as ‘compelling’ and suggests that the transition between the text’s disparate narratives is largely ‘smooth’, he argues that Faulks’ engagement with radical Islam is less successful, in fact ‘rather plodding.’<sup>463</sup> Indeed, the narrative thread offers little in the way of interrogative analysis, and as a result the depiction of Hassan is somewhat too two-dimensional to reflect upon the innumerable complexities of British-Muslim experience. Blogging on his ‘YourPlace’ page – Faulks’ satirical

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<sup>461</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The Voice of the Lonely Crowd’ in *Guardian* (June 1, 2002) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jun/01/philosophy.society>> (accessed 06.07.07)

<sup>462</sup> Pankaj Mishra, ‘The End of Innocence’ in *Guardian* (May 19, 2007) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/19/fiction.martinamis>> (accessed 28.06.10)

<sup>463</sup> Justin Cartwright, ‘*A Week in December* by Sebastian Faulks’ [Review] in *Observer* (August 23, 2009) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/23/week-in-december-faulks>> (accessed 01.10.09)

take on the dehumanising phenomena of ‘social networking’, where individuals are encouraged to form ‘virtual’ communities to prevent them from having to form ‘real’ social bonds – Hassan details his existential quandary. Having lost interest in his faith while at school (‘it was pushing me away from friends and making a foreigner of me’), he writes how, at college, he immersed himself in politics and in so doing, ‘caught a glimpse of how there could be a unified explanation.’ With politics exposing to him the regressive functioning of religion, Hassan notes how he suddenly had a ‘sort of road to Damascus – road to Mecca, more like – moment’, and reached the epiphanic conclusion that, ‘identity was more important than economic power and that till we’ve got that sorted out we’re going nowhere fast.’<sup>464</sup> Having submitted his blog to his YourPlace page, he receives a message from ‘Grey\_Rider,’ a predatory Islamic radical who uses a ‘powerful search engine that picks up a lot of keywords’ to single out those disaffected Muslim youths ready for inculcation, and so his turn to fundamentalism is initiated.

Clearly Hassan’s search for meaning is redolent of earlier fictional depictions of the young dislocated British-Muslim who, having experimented with a number of different identities, embraces fundamentalism as a means to assert a coherent sense of self. Moreover, there are obvious parallels between Salim (‘Grey\_Rider’) and the portrayal of the predatory fanatic as epitomised by *The Black Album*’s Riaz. Unlike previous depictions that more thoroughly interrogate the contradictions and tensions of British-Muslim identity however, Hassan’s narrative thread does not so much offer ‘a serious examination of Islam and the reasons for radicalism among young Muslims,’ as it reaffirms reductive stereotypes. Indeed, whereas the fictions of the new post-migrant tradition exploit existing stereotypes as a means to interrogate established interpretations of radical Islam, *A Week in December* merely exploits and reinforces reductive interpretations. The caricatured depiction of Hassan is perhaps exemplified by the unsatisfactory conclusion of the narrative. Similarly to the unconvincing, ‘Hollywood’, ending of Updike’s *Terrorist* – where Ahmad is persuaded, at the last minute by his reviled Jewish guidance counsellor, to retract his hand from the detonator button set to explode a lorry full of fertiliser and fuel within the busy Lincoln Tunnel, and see the light<sup>465</sup> – *A Week in December* concludes with Hassan having a timely moment of clarity, abandoning his role in a terrorist plot en route to

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<sup>464</sup> Sebastian Faulks, *A Week in December* (London: Hutchinson, 2009), pp.115-116

<sup>465</sup> John Updike, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006), p.310



the target and admitting to his friend that he ‘may have been ... Misled’ (p.385). Faulks’ depiction of the Islamic radical is here reduced to a simplistic formula that is almost akin to the image of the impetuous teenager rebelling against authority. Just as teenage rebellion is, almost inevitably, short-lived, so Hassan’s, and indeed Ahmad’s, foray into Islamic fundamentalism is fleeting. Neither Faulks nor Updike offer any considerable analyses of the complexities of Islamism. Rather, evoking a latent Orientalism, they incorporate a stylised version of radical Islam into their narratives ostensibly as a means to highlight the omnipotent rationalism of the West; both Hassan and Ahmad abandon fundamentalism after experiencing a moment of ‘enlightenment’ (they figuratively ‘see the light’).

While the generic portrayals of the fundamentalist, as evidence in the novels of Faulks and Updike, are irrefutably problematic, they are perhaps reflective of extent to which the image of the fundamentalist has permeated the contemporary consciousness. While such fictional depictions may be conceived as being rather too formulaic to be ‘authentic’, we might argue that credibility is effectively determined by the extent to which a character is recognisable. As such, in a society whose iconography is so thoroughly saturated with stereotypes, it is difficult to conceive how an author might reflect contemporary concerns without resorting to, or else exploiting, recognised character types. While the global transmission of martyrdom videos has undeniably established a universally recognisable image of the Islamic fundamentalist, the international nature of the Al-Qaeda network ensures that it is members of the Islamic faith generally, rather than individuals from specific nations, who are increasingly viewed by the West with suspicion. Consequently, and as Hamid reluctantly discovers on his anxious tube journey, the stereotyped image of militant Islam has pervaded the public consciousness to such an extent that racial profiling becomes an inevitable, if undesirable, practice.

The increasing visibility of the ‘identikit’ Islamist is exploited in much contemporary fiction, and engenders the construction of the ‘ambiguous’ fundamentalist. Patricia Duncker’s novel *Miss Webster and Chérif*, for instance, knowingly plays with the heightened anxieties of the post-9/11 age where the Muslim is increasingly viewed with suspicion. She draws upon the clichéd depiction of the fundamentalist as a means to emphasise the pervasive practice of racial profiling within British society, and thus throughout the narrative, the ambiguous rendering of Chérif results in not only the villagers questioning his motives, but also Miss Webster

herself and, indeed, the reader. The ambiguity inherent to Mohsin Hamid's depiction of Changez within *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), is similarly facilitated by the extent to which his portrayal simultaneously exploits and challenges the expectations of its, presumably, Western readership.

The novel tells the story of Changez, a young Pakistani who, living in New York, finds his public and inner sense of self irrevocably altered following the attacks of 9/11. His retrospective monologue is structured by a framing narrative, in which he recounts his life in New York to an ambiguous American, in a café in Lahore. Indeed, much of the novel's ambiguity lies in the increasingly fraught exchange between Changez and the unnamed American. In much the same way as Duncker plays with the expectations of the reader, so too Hamid's narrative relies upon the ubiquitous perception of the fundamentalist that permeates the contemporary consciousness, and the associated myth of the inevitable demonization of the Muslim following 9/11. Indeed, in a similar way to *Brick Lane*, the narrative seems to be suggestive of a noticeable cultural shift precipitated by the terrorist attacks. Like Ali's novel, however, while Changez's relationship with America is undeniably complicated by the events of September 11, the 'post-9/11' anxieties that define his emergent identity are evident within the preliminary, 'pre-9/11' sections of his monologue. While one must keep in mind that Changez's account is retrospective, the novel nonetheless emphasises the extent to which the complexities that define post-9/11 perceptions of the Muslim have their genesis within the pre-9/11 concerns of migrant identity. While, Changez's pre-9/11 self extols the liberal multiculturalism of New York, there remains within the narrative an underlying sense of his cultural dislocation.

Certainly, while there is little sense of him possessing the characteristic 'double-consciousness' as perceived by Du Bois and reflected within much post-migrant fiction, his early conception of self is nonetheless defined by a fundamental duplicity. Changez's 'warring selves' are not so much determined by his being torn between two cultures, as his having to suppress his 'real' identity and 'perform' a contrary subjectivity that conforms to the perceived expectations his American contemporaries attribute to his background. Hailing from a respected Pakistani family, Changez recounts how his family's high social standing is maintained, despite their diminishing wealth. While his great-grandfather had 'the means to endow a school for the Muslims of the Punjab', he comments how the stagnant economic climate within Pakistan, where salaries failed to rise concomitantly with inflation,

meant that each successive generation became progressively less affluent. Changez notes that ‘status, as in any traditional, class-conscious society, declines more slowly than wealth’, and thus in spite of their financial difficulties, the family’s social kudos remained.<sup>466</sup> Indeed, the family reputation travels with Changez to Princeton where he is keen to maintain the illusion of grandeur. Having secured his place at the university through financial aid and a scholarship, he strives to conserve his family’s prosperous repute, and so adopts an affected public character that masks the realities of his ‘real’ existence:

At Princeton, I conducted myself in public like a young prince, generous and carefree. But I also, as quietly as I could, held down three on-campus jobs – in infrequently visited locations, such as the library of the Program in Near Eastern Studies – and prepared for my classes throughout the night. Most people I met were taken in by my public persona (p.11).

For Changez, assimilation into Princeton society, paradoxically, is not facilitated through sacrificing his cultural heritage, but rather through emphatically embracing and exaggerating it.

Having graduated from Princeton, he secures a position as a financial consultant with the lucrative firm Underwood Samson, and moves to New York. The city’s renowned cosmopolitan reputation is reaffirmed as he recalls his comfort at being able to travel on the subway wearing a ‘starched white kurta of delicately worked cotton over a pair of jeans’ (p.48). The apparent ease in which he is able to successfully integrate into American society, whilst retaining and exploiting his cultural ‘difference’, is evidently in stark distinction to the models of migrant identity explored previously; yet just as the exterior image of his affected Princeton identity is destabilised by a counter subjectivity, so too his apparently unproblematic insertion into American society belies his cultural dislocation. Having had his position at Underwood Samson confirmed, Changez is given a ‘sign-on bonus’, which allows him to travel to Greece with a number of his fellow Princetonians, and it is at this point of his monologue that fractures begin to appear in his hitherto harmonious relationship with the West. During a group dinner, the sense of his cultural otherness emerges, as ‘Chuck’ entertains his fellow diners with a series of impersonations. While Changez

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<sup>466</sup> Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), pp.9-10

recalls how the majority of the imitations were ‘uncanny’, in his mind, Chuck’s portrayal of his mannerisms were ‘somewhat exaggerated.’ The notion of Changez being distinct from the other members of the group is further emphasised as each person around the table is asked to reveal their future aspirations. While uttered in humour, the response to Changez’s reply is suggestive of the extent to which the ‘other’ continues to be viewed with suspicion by the West. He remembers that ‘when my turn came, I said I hoped one day to be the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability; the others appeared shocked, and I was forced to explain that I had been joking’ (p.29).

As his monologue progresses, so his inherent otherness becomes increasingly evident. In Greece Changez becomes quickly frustrated by his contemporaries’ hedonism and lack of ‘refinement,’ compared to his ‘traditional sense of deference’ (p.21); and moreover, the bond forged between him and his boss Jim is essentially determined by their both ‘feeling out of place’<sup>467</sup> (p.43). It is perhaps the account of his business trip to Manila, however, where despite his attempting to ‘act and speak, as much as [his] dignity would permit, more like an *American*’, his sense of dislocation from American culture is, prior to 9/11, most discernible. He recalls how moments during the trip made him ‘disorientated’, and notes one particular instance where, being driven in a limousine accompanied by his work colleagues, he becomes subject to the ‘undisguised hostility’ of a Filipino’s gaze. Piqued by the intimacy of his projected resentment, Changez becomes preoccupied with trying to understand the possible reasons behind such apparent loathing, rationalising that he and the jeepney driver share ‘a sort of Third World sensibility.’ In aligning himself with the local Filipinos, Changez’s disparity from his colleagues is magnified, and his connection to the group fractured. The performative subjectivity which, from his time in Princeton, had defined his identity and ensured his integration within American society, is immediately undermined by its fundamental duplicity: ‘I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside’ (pp.65-67).

It is in Manila that Changez first becomes aware of the events of 9/11, and as he watches the image of the World Trade Center collapsing on the television screen in

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<sup>467</sup> Like Changez, Jim’s place at Princeton was financed by his having to work covertly in jobs that were ‘far enough from campus that people wouldn’t find out’ (p.9).

his hotel room, his response comes to encapsulate the complexities of his proceeding relationship with America:

*I smiled.* Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased. [...] At that moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack [...] no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees (pp.72-73).

His reaction to the events noticeably shocks his American auditor, yet for the contemporary reader, for whom the clichéd image of the Islamic fundamentalist has effectively become normalised, Changez's response is perhaps less of a surprise. Indeed, the very title of the novel, considered alongside the emergent 'pre-9/11' tensions that impact upon his identity, establishes the expectation that the narrative will chronicle Changez's, albeit reluctant, progression from moderation to fundamentalism. Within his proceeding monologue, there is much evidence to support such a supposition. Leaving Manila several days after the terrorist attacks, the sense of dislocation that had previously mediated his identity, is intensified as his otherness becomes the defining factor of his character. He notes how on his return flight to New York he became uncomfortable in his own face, and 'aware of being under suspicion [...] tried therefore to be as nonchalant as possible' (p.74). Moreover, on returning from a trip to Lahore, complete with beard, the previous ease with which he was able to traverse the city landscape relatively unnoticed is contrasted with his newly emergent conspicuousness; travelling on the subway is now accompanied by hostility and verbal abuse from strangers, and camaraderie in the workplace replaced with 'whispers and stares' (p.130).

Changez's post-9/11 self is certainly more reflective of the contradictory nature of migrant identity as outlined by Du Bois. Undeniably a product of Western culture – the narrative is replete with references to Western popular culture – yet simultaneously ostracised by American society, the conflicting influences of his identity perfectly encapsulate the dualistic facets of migrant identity. The post-9/11 intensification of Changez's warring selves is exemplified by his defining himself as 'a modern-day janissary', torn between his responsibility, via his employment with Underwood Samson, to the American nation, and his 'compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain'

(p.152). With the post-9/11 rhetoric of the United States fuelling his anger, Changez, in deciding to return to Lahore, concludes that ‘such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own’ (p.168).

Clearly, while the intensification of his hatred towards the imperial posturing and self-aggrandisement of America does not necessarily equate to a turn to fundamentalism, the precedent of volatile migrant identities as exploited within the post-migrant tradition, functions to formulate the reader’s response to Changez. The clichéd depictions of the Islamic radical, as featured in such texts as ‘The Last Days of Mohammad Atta’, *Terrorist* and *A Week in December*, demonstrate the extent to which the image of the fundamentalist has permeated Western iconography; certainly while not unique to post-9/11 literature, the character of the religious fanatic pervades the narratives of contemporary fiction with an incomparable intensity. It is precisely such saturation that enables Hamid to play with the expectations of the reader. The text is replete with instances that suggest Changez’s turn to radicalism, yet the narrative similarly emphasises the economic fundamentalism that defines Western capitalism, and of which he was, albeit ‘reluctantly’, a part.<sup>468</sup> The framing narrative, whilst establishing a clear tension between Changez and his American companion (who, in an apparent reverse-colonialism, remains silent throughout the novel), similarly provides the reader with no clear sense of resolution; as with the exemplary postmodern novel, the hermeneutic code is essentially incomplete. Offering ‘an elegant and sharp indictment of the clouds of suspicion that now shroud the world,’<sup>469</sup> it is perhaps this ‘ambiguous’ depiction of the fundamentalist that most saliently reflects the representation of Islamism within contemporary, post-9/11 fiction. And while Hamid, on his tube journey, discovers the inevitability of racial profiling within the post-9/11 environment, within *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* it is Changez’s concluding logic that resonates: ‘It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists’ (p.183).

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<sup>468</sup> Underwood Samson’s guiding principle is defined as the need to ‘focus on the fundamentals’ (p.98).

<sup>469</sup> Jim Ottewill ‘Mistaken Identities’ in *Observer* (March 11, 2007)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/11/fiction.features>> (accessed 26.07.07)

## 5. Conclusion: Zadie Smith and the Deconstruction of the Myth

### 5.1 Smith at the Crossroads

In healthy times, we cut multiple roads, allowing for the possibility of a Jean Genet as surely as a Graham Greene. These aren't particularly healthy times.<sup>470</sup>

The title of Zadie Smith's recently published collection of essays seems entirely relevant, since the sentiment of 'changing her mind' perfectly captures the author's *oeuvre*: *White Teeth* (2000) offers a satirical, yet totalising, depiction of multicultural London at the turn of the century, *The Autograph Man* (2002) offers a more speculative meditation upon the lure of the commodity within contemporary society, and *On Beauty* (2005), undeniably the most pensive of her fictions, engages with the nature of aesthetic value. Indeed, while *White Teeth* has been both compared to the 'big American novels' that offer a sprawling depiction of contemporary life<sup>471</sup> and described as 'registering the changes wrought in the language and landscape by the unfolding epic of post-war migration'<sup>472</sup>, in contrast *On Beauty* is thought to meditate on the 'large, Forsterian themes of friendship, marriage [...] social tension [and] artistic expression,' rendering it 'a rather heroic attempt to dignify contemporary life with a mirror held up in the grandly burnishing Bloomsbury manner.'<sup>473</sup> Head usefully summarises the transition seen in her fictions by suggesting that if *White Teeth* 'seemed to march forward under Salman Rushdie's carnivalesque banner, then *On Beauty* [...] announced the liberal sentiments that, in some shape or form, continue to govern the possibilities of the novel.'<sup>474</sup> The apparent shift in concern in Smith's fictions from a totalising reflection of British multiculturalism to a contemplative engagement with aestheticism, and the associated transition in stylistic approach from the carnivalesque *à la* Rushdie to Forsterian liberalism, seem to support the claims

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<sup>470</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Two Directions for the Novel' in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), p.71

<sup>471</sup> John Mullan, 'Size is Everything' in *Guardian* (September 21, 2002)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/sep/21/zadiesmith>> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>472</sup> Unsigned Review, 'In a Strange Land' in *Guardian* (January 22, 2000)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/jan/22/fiction.zadiesmith>> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>473</sup> James Lasdun, 'Howards Folly' in *Observer* (September 10, 2005)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/sep/10/fiction.zadiesmith>> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>474</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*, p.24

made by Wood regarding the status of the contemporary novel (as outlined in Chapter 2), and thus subsequently corroborate the myth of 9/11.

*White Teeth*, characterised by Wood as displaying ‘a fear of silence,’<sup>475</sup> might effectively be interpreted as a work of ‘hysterical realism,’ and moreover in offering an overarching depiction of multicultural London, might tentatively be described as a novel that ‘tells us how the world works.’ *On Beauty*, however, might more usefully be understood as a novel of introspection. Like *Saturday*, *Millennium People* and *Never Let Me Go*, the novel displays a much narrower focus that, rather than offering an authoritative rendering of a specific cultural moment – a mimetic reflection that ‘tells us how the world works’ – enables the emergence of ‘the contemplative.’ *On Beauty* is irrefutably a novel that tells us ‘how somebody felt about something.’<sup>476</sup> Indeed, as if further substantiation of the myth of 9/11 were required, Head, writing in 2008, contends that *White Teeth* ‘has an innocence that is inconceivable now,’ adding that ‘the naivety of the novel, if such it is, has not to do with its misunderstanding of racial tension [...] but with its celebration of transcultural hybridity.’<sup>477</sup> While shortly after the novel’s publication Smith herself expressed anxieties regarding its naivety<sup>478</sup>, the extent to which the myth of 9/11, or more specifically the expectation that fictions should possess an increased seriousness following the event, has determined later retrospective assessments of the novel, needs to be questioned. The fact that studies still engage with the text would seem to suggest its continued significance within the post-9/11 landscape. Moreover, just as it might be argued that the sense of ‘innocence’ attributed to the pre-9/11 moment is a descriptor applied retrospectively as a means to emphasise the darker, more anxious mood of the contemporary moment,<sup>479</sup> so the later assessments of *White Teeth* that draw attention to the naïve manner in which the text celebrates ‘transcultural hybridity,’ might similarly be conceived as interpretations filtered through the lens of the myth. The extent to which the novel might be interpreted as celebratory will be explored below. The transition in style and

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<sup>475</sup> James Wood, ‘Tell Me How Does It Feel?’

<sup>476</sup> Ibid

<sup>477</sup> Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*, p.94

<sup>478</sup> See Simon Hattenstone’s ‘White Knuckle Ride’ in *Guardian* (December 11, 2000) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/dec/11/fiction.whitbreadbookawards2000>> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>479</sup> In *Saturday* Perowne recalls his encounter with the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, noting that ‘it was back in May 2000, a time now acquiring a polish, a fake gleam of innocence’ (p.142). This seems to suggest that in order to distinguish the anxious post-9/11 moment from the preceding era, a false sense of innocence is imbued to the past.



sensibility evident in Smith's fictions is undeniable, yet the degree to which the shift might be attributed to the assumed inception of an altered post-9/11 cultural mood is wholly contentious.

In the foreword to her collection of 'occasional essays', Smith assigns the changing style of her fiction to her youth. She argues that 'when you are first published at a young age, your writing grows with you – and in public.' While she subsequently concedes that 'ideological inconsistency is, for me, practically an article of faith,'<sup>480</sup> her admission functions to attribute her evolving narrative style to factors other than the assumed cultural shift instigated by the events of 9/11. In her essay 'Two Directions for the Novel' she reappropriates Lodge's conception of the author loitering at the crossroads (as explored in Chapter 1) to reflect upon the status of the contemporary Anglophone novel. Smith compares two seemingly disparate works of recent fiction, O'Neill's *Netherland* and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005), and aligns the former with the dominant mode of 'lyrical realism' that 'has had the freedom of the highway for some time now,'<sup>481</sup> while the latter is positioned alongside the novels of Ballard, Perec, and Burroughs in the metafictional corpus that 'has been relegated to a safe corner of literary history, to be studied in postmodernity modules.'<sup>482</sup> Emphasising the fundamental 'unhealthiness' of the contemporary moment – a sentiment that, in a previous essay, she explicates through Forster's assertion that 'this is such a difficult moment to live in, one cannot help getting gloomy and also a bit rattled, and perhaps short-sighted'<sup>483</sup> – Smith observes how authors, and indeed consumers, have been increasingly reluctant to venture down the route that leads to metafiction. She contends:

The literary economy sets up its stall on the road that leads to *Netherland*, along which one might wave to Jane Austen, George Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Yates, Saul Bellow. Rarely has it been less aware (or less interested) in seeing what's new on the route to *Remainder*, that skewed side road where we greet Georges Perec, Clarice Lispector, Maurice Blanchot, William Burroughs, J.G. Ballard. Friction, fear and outright hatred spring up often between these two traditions – yet they have revealing points of

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<sup>480</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Foreword' to *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*

<sup>481</sup> Zadie Smith 'Two Directions for the Novel' in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, p.71

<sup>482</sup> Ibid, p.73

<sup>483</sup> Zadie Smith, 'E.M. Forster, Middle Manager' in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, p.25

connection. At their crossroads we find extraordinary writers claimed by both sides.<sup>484</sup>

She goes on to argue that recent metafictional novels such as *Remainder* function to ‘shake the novel out of its present complacency’ and enable the opening up of alternate routes;<sup>485</sup> for while the lyrical realism of *Netherland* satiates its readers, it is ‘so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis.’<sup>486</sup> Indeed, Smith designates O’Neill’s text as a ‘post-catastrophe novel’, where the catastrophe is not, as perhaps expected, terror, but rather, realism.<sup>487</sup>

The continued socio-cultural significance of the novel, then, seemingly lies within those fictions emerging at the point in which the two routes meet. Indeed, it is precisely at the point of intersection that, in acknowledging the changing styles of Smith’s fictions, we might position her. As will be emphasised below, despite their apparent disparity, there is a continuation of theme and concern that is evident throughout her three novels, and which situates them as representative of a broader structure of feeling. Throughout this study, a recurring concern of the fictions examined, both from the pre- and post-9/11 landscapes, has been an awareness of the need to counter the meaninglessness of contemporary society by (re)embracing a sense of collective being. As a remedy to the alienation that defines contemporary (postmodern) subjectivity, the need to situate the individual within a larger collective consciousness has recently been aligned with the (assumed) post-9/11 phenomenon of ‘species consciousness’. As demonstrated throughout this narrative, however, the ‘return of an ancient human universal’ or the need for ‘that human touch,’ might better be interpreted as a reaction to the superficial banality of the postmodern condition, whose genesis considerably predates the events of 9/11. As the readings below demonstrate, in deconstructing the utopianism of multiculturalism and gesturing towards the necessary implementation of cosmopolitanism, Smith’s novels capture this zeitgeist. Moreover, while the parallel between *On Beauty* and Forster’s *Howards End* is explicit, central to Smith’s *oeuvre* is the contemporary reworking of Forsterian humanism.

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<sup>484</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, p.93

<sup>485</sup> Ibid

<sup>486</sup> Ibid, pp.71-72

<sup>487</sup> Ibid, p.73

## 5.2 Naming the Systems: Multiculturalism and Cosmopolitanism

The ‘multicultural’ credentials of Zadie Smith’s debut novel *White Teeth* (2000) are perhaps unquestionable. Instantly from the novel’s publication, and in some cases even prior to it, the text was held up to be a *tour de force* of contemporary literature. An epic transgenerational saga exploring the nuances of contemporary British subjectivity (a term which is itself continually deconstructed and revised throughout the novel), *White Teeth* was, with only a few exceptions, universally hailed as *the* text of the new millennium. Initial responses to the book were largely congratulatory, and emphatically declared its literary, and indeed cultural, significance. Stephen Moss’s assessment of the novel as possessing ‘energy, pace, humour and fully formed characters’<sup>488</sup> is characteristic of many of the initial reviews of the text. So relentless was the acclaim heaped upon *White Teeth*, that in an article evaluating the millennial year’s contribution to literature (which, apparently, ‘has not [...] been an exceptional one for books’) Robert McCrum concludes that ‘there is no doubt that it marks an important literary watershed in much the same way as the publication of *Midnight’s Children* or *The Buddha of Suburbia*.’<sup>489</sup> Such a conclusion is interesting for a multitude of reasons, not least because it appears to contain an inherent contradiction. For McCrum, *White Teeth* is representative, and indeed marks the inception of, an altered mood in contemporary British fiction. Yet at the same time, in placing the novel alongside *Midnight’s Children* and *The Buddha of Suburbia*, McCrum situates *White Teeth* within a specific (new) post-migrant tradition. The novel itself is deeply intertextual, and coupled with the author’s own cultural heritage (the significance of which Smith would undoubtedly wish to challenge) such comparisons are perhaps inevitable.

Certainly, McCrum is not alone in positioning the novel within an already established postcolonial and/or multicultural tradition. Early analyses of the novel are as haunted by the spectres of Rushdie, Kureishi, *et al.* as is, apparently, the novel itself. Caryl Phillips, for instance, argues that through the ‘deeply self conscious’ narrator ‘one can almost hear the crisp echo of Salman Rushdie’s footsteps’<sup>490</sup>; whilst

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<sup>488</sup> Stephen Moss, ‘White Teeth by Zadie Smith’ in *Guardian* (January 26, 2000)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/jan/26/fiction.zadiesmith>> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>489</sup> Robert McCrum, ‘Underwhelmed’ in *Observer* (December 24, 2000)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/dec/24/bestbooksoftheyear.bestbooks>> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>490</sup> Caryl Phillips, ‘Mixed and Matched’ in *Observer* (January 9, 2000)

a *Guardian* review suggests that ‘whether pilfering or in playful homage, the novel carries echoes from the migrant, or “post-migrant”, literature of such as Sam Selvon, Caryl Phillips, Michael Ondaatje, and Hanif Kureishi.’<sup>491</sup> In drawing such parallels, Smith’s novel is then contextualised within both the new postmodern corpus (explored in Chapter 1) and the new post-migrant tradition (explored in Chapter 4). Smith herself, however, keen to exorcise any lingering literary spirits, suggests that whilst such comments are generally flattering, the racist assumptions that the comparisons imply are intensely problematic. Ostensibly refuting her positioning alongside such figures, Smith glibly comments: ‘I think I have brown people in my book, and so does Salman, and so does Hanif Kureishi. So it’s a genre, don’t you see that?’<sup>492</sup> While it must be agreed that the dangers of placing any work of fiction into an established tradition, indeed to talk of tradition at all, are obvious (an ‘individual’ text, in being categorised as a constituent part of a larger external grouping, runs the risk of being swept away by a tide of homogenisation), both the source of Smith’s ire and the implications that such a view places upon the practice of reading, are seemingly just as problematic. In refusing to acknowledge the wider contexts, and indeed co-texts, surrounding *White Teeth*, Smith, in an apparent reversal of Barthesian thought, imposes specific limits upon the reading of the text. Moreover, even if the cultural heritage of the author is discounted, the actual substance of the novel (the style of narration, the processes of characterisation, the complex multi-layered plot) emerges as part, and continuation of, a specific ‘post-migrant’ British tradition. This is not, of course, to limit readings of the text to this particular context, yet to reject such comparisons on the grounds of an implied racism deprives the richness of reading that *White Teeth* seems to provoke. Indeed, a contextual reading, in a now post-9/11 environment, exposes the significance of the pre-9/11 novel to post-9/11 debates surrounding multiculturalism, which, as will be explored below, seemingly deconstructs the assumptions of the myth.

Following the events of 9/11, cultural commentators and politicians alike have been quick to announce the death of multiculturalism. Societies that had previously celebrated their liberal stance towards immigration, found themselves facing both fear

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<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/jan/09/fiction.zadiesmith>> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>491</sup> Unsigned Review, ‘In a Strange Land’

<sup>492</sup> Simon Hattenstone, ‘White Knuckle Ride’ in *Guardian* (December 11, 2000)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/dec/11/fiction.whitbreadbookawards2000>> (accessed 29.10.08)

and segregation from within. As a utopian ideal, multiculturalism was deemed by many to have monumentally failed. Paul Gilroy suggests that while the concept seems to have been ‘abandoned at birth’, within the post-9/11 landscape, multiculturalism’s ‘corpse is now being laid to rest amid the multiple anxieties of the “war on terror”’.<sup>493</sup> *White Teeth* emerges here as a useful text to read alongside such debates, for despite being written prior to 9/11, the novel simultaneously offers a vibrant celebration of the successes of millennial multiculturalism *and* a satirical critique of its many shortcomings. The frequent instances of multicultural dissatisfaction that pervade the text (and continue to feature dominantly in Smith’s two subsequent novels) are, towards the conclusion of *White Teeth*, aptly summed up through a vision experienced by Irie, a character perhaps representative of Britain’s new post-migrant generation, who ‘has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t, because they’re too long and they’re too torturous and they’re just buried too damn deep.’<sup>494</sup> Such a vision seems to envisage the need for a concept that transcends the apparent trappings of late-twentieth-century multiculturalism, and looks towards a more human-centred philosophy akin to species consciousness, where individuals are no longer defined predominantly by their cultural heritage. For Irie, such imagined individuals inhabit not multicultural spaces, but rather, the utopian expanses of neutrality:

What a peaceful existence. What a *joy* their lives must be. They open a door and all they’ve got behind it is a bathroom or a lounge. Just neutral spaces. And not this endless maze of present rooms and past rooms and the things said in them years ago and everybody’s old historical shit all over the place (p.514).

The habitation of such neutral spaces seemingly hints towards the necessary inception of a form of cosmopolitanism, which, unlike multiculturalism, necessitates an increased emphasis upon an individual’s affiliation to an apparently universal human collective. Such a philosophy dictates that an individual’s specific history and cultural alliances are secondary concerns; one is first and foremost a human being, and secondly a female, a Muslim, etc. For Irie, the lived experience of multicultural

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<sup>493</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p.1

<sup>494</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin Books, 2000:2001), p.527

existence shows itself to be inhibitive; attempts to forge a positive sense of selfhood (to pass through ‘neutral spaces’) are thwarted by the reluctant acceptance that ‘individual’ identity is invariably, and restrictively, pre-formulated (one passes instead through rooms already historically furnished). In this sense, the novel suggests the existence, within the context of pre-9/11 London, of a definite gap between the optimistic ideologies outlining multiculturalism and their social implementation. As speculative narratives, her subsequent two novels express similar concerns through their respective meditations upon the post-9/11 landscape.

Like postmodernism and many of the other ‘isms’ adopted and applied by social commentators to simplify the complexity of the current mood into accessible ‘catch-all’ labels, both multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are notoriously difficult concepts to define. In the United Kingdom, particularly under the government of New Labour and the optimistic rebranding of the nation as ‘Cool Britannia’, the term ‘multiculturalism’ has become a ubiquitous buzzword in both political and cultural debates to describe the status of contemporary Britain. Frequently bandied about as a general term signalling the nation’s inclusionary attitude toward all people of all cultures (regardless of gender, class, race, sexuality, etc), the contemporary conception of ‘multiculturalism’ is devoid of any sense of specificity and, as David Bennett suggests, ‘is fast following “postmodernism” from the isolation ward of scare quotes into the graveyard of unusable, because overused, jargon.’<sup>495</sup> Moreover, in an edited volume whose very title (*Un/Settled Multiculturalisms*) emphasises the multiple, and often contradictory, conceptions of the term, Stuart Hall concludes an essay addressing the various manifestations of multiculturalism (including, amongst others, ‘conservative multiculturalism’, ‘liberal multiculturalism’, ‘commercial multiculturalism’ and ‘critical or “revolutionary” multiculturalism’), by challenging the significance of the term to contemporary socio-cultural discourse. Similarly to the manner in which the ‘usefulness’ of postmodernism as a socio-cultural designator has been questioned (as explored in Chapter 1), he asks, ‘can a concept which means so many different things and so effectively draws the fire of such diverse and contradictory enemies really have anything to say to us?’<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> David Bennett, in the Introduction to *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity* ed. David Bennett (London: Routledge, 1998:2001), p.1

<sup>496</sup> Stuart Hall ‘Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural Question’ in *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, ‘Transruptions’* ed. Barnor Hesse (London: Zed Books, 2000), p.211

Similar concerns might also arise when considering the uncomplicated manner into which the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ has entered Western discourse. Definitions of the concept are, like multiculturalism, variable, and the term so liberally applied that any resounding understanding of it is ultimately elusive. In an important study that goes some way to explore the nuances of the term, Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that the cosmopolitan vision ‘begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence.’<sup>497</sup> For Appiah, such habits originate in the form of ‘conversation’, a model to which his study frequently returns. In his usage of the term, conversation implies not just a sense of shared dialogue, but additionally an awareness of human synthesis; a hinting towards universalism, without the necessary eradication of difference that such a homogenising approach traditionally implies. Appiah states that one of the aims of his study is to ‘make it harder to think of the world as divided between the West and the Rest,’<sup>498</sup> a desire that is itself aligned with the cosmopolitan vision. In this sense, it is perhaps unsurprising that ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ are sometimes used interchangeably; in an increasingly globalised world, both concepts seemingly foster shared ideals that advocate the necessary implementation of racial and cultural harmony.<sup>499</sup>

In an essay that explores the geographical, political and social conceptions of the self, Ihab Hassan distinguishes between the understanding of a society that is multicultural and one that is *multiculturalist*. He argues that while ‘multiculturalism

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<sup>497</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), p.ix

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid*, p.xxi

<sup>499</sup> In a 2006 speech addressing the status of ‘multicultural’ Britain, for instance, then Prime Minister Tony Blair seemingly conflates the two terms into the emergence of a liberal ideology that emphasises the importance of ‘shared, common unifying British values’ (‘Speech on Multiculturalism and Integration’, December 8, 2006). Similarly in a 2005 paper presented by Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, multicultural and cosmopolitan ideals amalgamate to form the, decidedly clichéd, vision of ‘a nation of many colours that combine to create a single rainbow’ (‘Sleepwalking to Segregation’, September 22, 2005). The lexical interchangeability that feature within both speeches is, however, problematic, as the subtle differences that distinguish the terms from one another are all but eradicated. The extent to which the (forced) interchangeability of the terms might be intentional, however, needs to be questioned. As Montserrat Guibernau and others have commented, as a result of the Western origins of the philosophy, ‘many regard cosmopolitanism as a new Western strategy in its long-term quest to dominate the rest of the globe’ (‘National Identity Versus Cosmopolitan Identity’ in *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation*, eds. David Held & Henrietta L. Moore, with Kevin Young (Oxford: Oneworld Publications 2008), pp.148-149). In this sense, Blair’s assertion that British ‘duties take clear precedence over any cultural or religious practice’ (‘Speech on Multiculturalism and Integration’) and Phillips’ cataloguing of values that ‘anyone who expects to live in Britain must respect and abide by’ (‘After 7/7: Sleepwalking to Segregation’) suggest the masquerading of cosmopolitanism under the guise of multiculturalism.

pervades the experience of our daily lives, nearly everywhere in the world [...] this does not mean that it coincides with the claims that ideologues make for it, left and right.<sup>500</sup> While notions of nationhood promote homogenised conceptions of fixity – determined by their geographical location, an individual might be defined as British, American, French, etc. – the physical composition of any given nation will be inevitably multicultural; that is, the population will be comprised of peoples of varying races and cultures, since no nation is monocultural. The seemingly innocuous suffix of *multiculturalism* adds to the concept a political dimension as the weight of divergent, and often conflicting, ideologies are brought to bear upon a revised sense of communal identity. The utopian vision of a multiculturalist society, then, depicts the harmonious existence of a community that retains a sense of coherent identity, whilst simultaneously acknowledging and celebrating its inherent diversity; indeed, the sense of coherence is determined *by* the recognition and acceptance of its essential diversity. A clear distinction then becomes apparent when exploring the defining characteristics of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. While Appiah, in reducing the term to a bite-sized slogan, defines cosmopolitanism as ‘universality plus difference,’<sup>501</sup> multiculturalism might be understood as the philosophy that extols the virtues of difference as a means to bring about social cohesion; in other words, ‘difference plus universality’.

As Hall comments, the questioning of the usefulness of terms so liberally applied and conflated is clear. Commenting on the need to revise conceptions of national identity within a post-migrant, post-war Britain, Dominic Head argues that ‘the novel has proved to be a fruitful site for investigating the hybridised cultural forms that might be produced in an evolving, and so *genuinely* multicultural Britain.’<sup>502</sup> As a text that, as many reviewers have commented, explores the nature of twentieth-century multiculturalism, *White Teeth* might usefully be thought of as offering such a ‘fruitful site.’ Certainly, rather than merely chronicling the passage of twentieth-century multiculturalism, the novel succeeds precisely through the way in which it continually deconstructs, and so challenges its continued significance. The sense of a unified multiculturalism is here proven to be a fallacy, and instead (lived)

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<sup>500</sup> Ihab Hassan, ‘Counter Points: Nationalism, colonialism, multiculturalism, etc. in personal perspective’ in *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*, p.292

<sup>501</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, p.151

<sup>502</sup> Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000:2002), p.156



conceptions of the term are shown to vary not only from one generation and one culture to the next, but also from individual to individual. It is a philosophy that is celebrated and deplored in equal measures, and as such *White Teeth* seemingly refuses to pass any definitive judgement on the status of multicultural Britain. Reviewers, including Caryl Phillips, have frequently commented on the difficulty of simplifying the complexity of *White Teeth* into a succinct précis, arguing that the ‘multi-layered, deeply-plotted novel resists easy categorisation’.<sup>503</sup> Perhaps, as he goes on to suggest, this is precisely Smith’s point. The very form and substance of the text – the interweaving plotlines, the disregard for (historical) chronology, the self-assured pseudo-realist narrative voice, the variety of intertextual influences – ensure that the novel defies simple categorisation, and so serve to encapsulate the wider problems of definition that it explores. Just as critics and reviewers have struggled to negotiate the complexities of the text and so produce a coherent synopsis, so the characters featured within the novel each contend with the forces, both internal and external, that threaten to reduce their identities to simple base formulas. Moreover, just as *White Teeth* seemingly eludes clear generic categorisation, so too its characters, in exploring the nuances of their individual and collective identities, challenge the boundaries dictated by ‘tradition,’ and so subsequently interrogate dominant conceptions of ‘multiculturalism.’ As such we might contend, contrary to Wood’s proposal, that *White Teeth* is a novel of speculation; this is a text that refuses to ‘tell us how the world works.’ The emergence of such introspective fictions, then, might not be attributed to the post-9/11 mood, but rather might be understood to emerge in response to the increasing frustration of the meaninglessness of the postmodern condition and the failed utopianism of multiculturalist philosophies.

### 5.3 The Speculative Multiculturalism of *White Teeth*

Keeping in mind the perils of reductionism, *White Teeth* might be described as an epic serio-comic saga of the Forsterian type which, through a trans-generational domestic chronicling, explores the nature of identity within ‘post-migrant’ London. Forming an unlikely alliance ‘fighting’ in a war that both men inadvertently miss, the friendship

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<sup>503</sup> Caryl Phillips, ‘Mixed and Matched’

between Englishman Archie Jones and Bangladeshi Samad Iqbal forms the hub of the novel, much as Aziz and Fielding's relationship does in Forster's *A Passage to India* and Omar and Johnny's in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and is essential to the text's exploration of multiculturalism. In a meditation upon the significance of history and the processes through which individual and collective identities are authenticated, *White Teeth* gestures towards the genre of *Bildungsroman*, albeit without the neat conclusion of self-discovery. As the novel advances, the characters do not so much uncover their 'true' identities, as come to realise that such definitive conceptions of the self are ultimately elusive.

As the narrative progresses into the post-war period, Samad and Archie, still united by their shared (non)experience of the war, come to encapsulate two contrasting attitudes regarding race relations in contemporary Britain. Despite his friendship with Archie, for Samad multicultural existence amounts to geographic integration – one lives alongside different communities – but cultural segregation. His obsession with the 'historical' account of the revolutionary actions of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande serve to illustrate the significance that Samad attributes to cultural heritage; even if, as in this case, the past is rendered through mythological, rather than historical, interpretations. The mythological reconstruction of the heroic actions of his great-grandfather gestures towards the postmodern sub-genre of historiographic metafiction, examined in Chapter 1, of which Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* might be representative. As the novel's narrator Saleem argues, 'sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts.'<sup>504</sup> Indeed, for Samad, the importance of honouring the memory of his heritage and maintaining loyal to his roots is so paramount that, in a bid to curtail what he sees as the corrupting influence of Western excess, he decides to send Magid, one of his young twin sons, back to Bangladesh to be brought up according to the traditions of his culture. In an ironic subversion of logic, however, on his return to London some years later, Magid has transformed into the type of effete Englishman who, complete with white suit, typically features in the narratives of Empire; whilst Millat, the twin left to weather the corrupting forces of Willesden society, does not so much rediscover a lost Muslim heritage, as embrace Islamic fundamentalism.

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<sup>504</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p.47

Archie, on the other hand, encapsulates a more *laissez-faire* attitude. With a failed marriage and suicide attempt behind him, he marries Jamaican born Clara, fathers a daughter, Irie, and quietly but contentedly meanders through life. In many ways a foil to some of the more dominant characters (Samad, Clara, Irie), it is perhaps surprising that it is through Archie that the novel offers its most convincing account of multiculturalism, and a definition that will be adopted for the purposes of this chapter.

Commenting upon his employment at MorganHero, the omnipotent narrator champions Archie's twenty year career in folding, by philosophising that 'you'll find things need folds, they need to overlap, otherwise life would be like a broadsheet: flapping in the wind and down the street so you lose the important sections' (p.15). Such a philosophy is readily transferrable onto a model of a harmonious post-migrant society that might be defined as 'multiculturalist'. To extend the allegorical association, the sense of overlap that is, for Archie, so crucial, would seem to gesture towards the necessity of integration within multicultural societies, whereby divergent cultures are able, at least in part, to amalgamate, thus sharing a sense of commonality. Furthermore, the physical nature of folding is essentially a process of layering, so that while there is a clear sense of unification (the folded paper constitutes one 'whole' object), each separate layer retains a sense of autonomy. Just so with multiculturalism: integration ensures a sense of shared commonality yet, as with the process of layering, individuals and communities retain a sense of distinctiveness. Reflective of multiculturalism in its purest form, the importance of folding suggests the need for the formation of a collective society, which simultaneously celebrates the inherent cultural diversity of its peoples, ensuring that, unlike the broadsheet, none of the 'important sections' are lost. Moreover, the process of folding suggests a further trait of contemporary (multicultural) subjectivity: namely, the inherent instability of identity.<sup>505</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> The concept of the 'fold' is a term explored extensively in the work of Gilles Deleuze. Drawing upon the tradition of Western philosophy, and particularly the work of Leibniz, Deleuze suggests that the very nature of existence is enabled through processes of folding. He argues that 'the outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside' (Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* tr. Séan Head (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp.96-97). Reflecting upon Foucauldian thought, Deleuze seemingly suggests the existence within Western society of a form of overdeterminism, whereby the unstable physicality of the outside (society) is reflected in, and determines the nature of, the inside (culture). Likewise, in thinking about the construction of human identity, the argument follows that the inner self, what might problematically be referred to as one's 'essence', is a continually fluctuating reflection of the wider forces of society. In this sense, identity is shown to be inextricably politically and culturally

The search for a pure, unalloyed identity, as encapsulated in *White Teeth* by Samad's insistent loyalty to tradition, is, then, shown to be futile, with the alleged 'corrupting' forces of British society proven to be an inevitable consequence of the processes of existence. All of which is not to suggest that cultural diversity is completely engulfed by its host culture; rather, the Deleuzian concept of folding suggests a dual process through which the outside both determines, and is determined by, the inside. In this sense, within contemporary (multicultural) society, individuals are perceived as being as much a product of their society as the emergent society, 'animated by peristaltic movements,' is a product of them. We might conclude, then, that the form of multiculturalism that Archie's folding philosophy gestures towards calls for a level of integration that transforms not only individual identities, but also established notions of nationhood and belonging.

Despite being formulated within a pre-9/11 fictional landscape, the vision of racial harmony that Archie's folding philosophy projects is reflected in more recent (post-9/11) models of liberal multiculturalism. In his 2006 speech defending his government's stance on multiculturalism and integration, Tony Blair is keen to distinguish between the exclusionary practice of assimilation and the 'unifying' procedure of integration that features dominantly within New Labour's model. Discussing the future of multiculturalism within a now post-7/7 Britain, he emphasises a heightened need for the implementation of integrational policies, arguing that multiculturalism is no longer about 'culture of lifestyle', but rather is concerned with 'integrating at the point of shared, common unifying British values'. He goes on to assert:

The right to be in a multicultural society was always, always implicitly balanced by a duty to integrate, to be part of Britain, to be British and Asian, British and black, British and white. Those whites who support the BNP's policy of separate races and those Muslims who shun integration into British society both contradict the fundamental values that define Britain today: tolerance, solidarity across the racial and religious divide, equality for all and between all.<sup>506</sup>

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embedded: 'recuperated by power-relations and relations of knowledge, the relation to oneself is continually reborn, elsewhere and otherwise' (p.104).

<sup>506</sup> Tony Blair, 'Speech on Multiculturalism'

Applicable to both migrants and ‘those whites who support the BNP’, Blair’s vision of integration might be thought of as a dual process that, through engaging multiple sectors of the British population, has the potential to revise understandings of nationhood and belonging. Like the process of folding outlined within Archie’s philosophy, the nature of the inside (the individual layers of divergent peoples, cultures and religions) is evidently both determined by, and determines, the essential features of the outside (the perception of ‘Britishness). Indeed, within the model that Blair outlines, the emergence of a nation that celebrates ‘solidarity’ and ‘equality for all’ is dependent not just upon the successful integration of its migrant population, but is also reliant upon the reformulation of those ‘native’ identities that are at odds with ‘British’ values. The liberalism of Blair’s (revised) multiculturalist stance is, however, debateable as he goes on to argue that ‘being British carries rights. It also carries duties. And those duties take clear precedence over any cultural or religious practice.’<sup>507</sup> The utopianism of the emergent multicultural vision thus comes crashing down, and the process outlined materialises as a form of partial assimilation, whereby in order to successfully grasp a sense of collective belonging, one must first sacrifice individual identity; a trait, as we have seen, that features frequently within (new) post-migrant examinations of subjectivity. A twist on Irie’s utopian dream, in Blair’s vision, one is first and foremost *British*, and secondly a female, a Muslim, etc.

The questions that arise from Blair’s vision of a unified Britain serve to emphasise the tensions inherent in the formation of an effective multicultural ideology: there is a need to form a collective community that is based upon ideals of freedom and equality; yet there is simultaneously the need to retain those individual values and beliefs that form distinctive personal, and communal, identities. Frequently overlooked within the political sphere, the question that demands answering is this: to what extent is a unified society that champions equality and freedom for all, able to retain and celebrate individual cultural diversity? This is precisely the dilemma that is explored, as we have seen, in *Brick Lane* and is further interrogated in *White Teeth*, suggesting that dissatisfaction toward the actualisation of multiculturalist philosophies is not specific to the post-9/11 moment. Indeed, whilst Archie’s folding philosophy provides a succinct depiction of liberal multiculturalism, like Blair’s account, a foreboding sense of inflexibility hangs over the utopian vision

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<sup>507</sup> Ibid

projected. The process of folding is extolled as a means to prevent specific sections from being lost – to prevent life from resembling ‘a broadsheet’ – yet when transposed onto a model of multiculturalism, Archie’s philosophy exposes the practice of integration as being a fundamentally one-sided process. An aside to the virtues of folding, the text continues: ‘Not that Archie had much time for the broadsheets. If they couldn’t be bothered to fold them properly, why should he bother to read them (that’s what he wanted to know)?’ (p.15). As a means to facilitate a multiculturalist society, integration in this model is clearly synonymous with assimilation; only once migrant individuals have embraced the hegemonic ideals of Britishness (once the paper has been folded ‘properly’), will ‘multicultural’ society in turn embrace them.

This restrictive form of cultural cohesion is emphasised later in the novel as Archie invites Samad and his wife, Alsana, over to dinner. Apparently keen to follow the correct etiquette, Clara asks whether she should prepare some curry for her guests, and is met with the following reply:

‘For God’s sake, they’re not *those* kind of Indians,’ said Archie irritably, offended at the suggestion. ‘Sam’ll have a Sunday roast like the next man. [...] They’re not the royal family, you know. They’re not *those* kind of Indians,’ he repeated, and shook his head, troubled by some problem, some knotty feeling he could not entirely unravel (p.54).

For Archie, ‘those kind of Indians’ are those individuals who continue to embrace and privilege their historical and cultural identity over and above any allegiance to Britain and British values; they are the social equivalent of the poorly folded broadsheet. While his friendship with Samad and marriage to Clara suggest a liberal outlook towards cultural diversity, Archie’s obvious annoyance at the implied suggestion of his wife, who is herself ‘not *that* kind of black’, serves to undercut the tolerant attitude that he seemingly encapsulates. Indeed, the discomfort, the ‘knotty feeling’, that Archie experiences at being associated with ‘those kind of Indians’ is telling, and again hints towards the manifestation of a model of multiculturalism that is closer to assimilation than integration. The manner in which Archie situates ‘Sam’ within the British tradition, suggests that their ‘inter-cultural’ friendship is based upon the extent to which Samad is anglicised; he is distinguished, by Archie, from ‘those kind of Indians’ precisely because, unlike the broadsheet, he is (albeit reluctantly) subject to

the processes of (social) folding. While Archie maintains that ‘people should just live together, you know, in peace or harmony or something’ (p.190), his perception of racial union is, in fact, decidedly more fragmented and selective than his statement intimates. Within his vision, it is not so much whole communities that are embraced, but rather those select individuals who fulfil a set of specific criteria that distinguishes them from ‘those kind of’ others. While not unique to the novel, the motif of ‘not that kind of...’ features throughout *White Teeth* as a means to challenge the liberalism of multiculturalism, and so to expose the underlying racial prejudice that continues to pervade socio-cultural discourse. Moreover, the explication of the motif throughout the text gestures toward one of the novel’s primary intertexts, and thus situates it within a continuing tradition of (new) post-migrant literature.

Similarly to *White Teeth*, the plot and structure of Kureishi’s *Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) hints towards the genre of *Bildungsroman*. The novel follows the maturation of Karim, a Rushdie-esque character who, ‘having emerged from two old histories’ (he has a Pakistani father and English mother), is a self-conceived ‘new breed,’ an ‘Englishman born and bred, almost.’<sup>508</sup> Traversing London and New York, the narrative chronicles Karim’s struggle to establish a stable racial and sexual identity. The eponymous Buddha refers to Karim’s father, an ‘insignificant’ employee of the British government, who adopts and teaches the philosophies of Hinduism, of which he himself has limited knowledge. Playing up to Western expectations of the Oriental, stumbling ‘around the place like an Indian just off the boat’ (p.7) and ‘hissing his s’s and exaggerating his Indian accent’(p.21), Haroon effectively commodifies, and so partially subverts, the cultural prejudices that typify post-migrant London. As Bart Moore-Gilbert argues, ‘in the enthusiasm of some of Haroon’s white admirers [...] Kureishi parodies the narrative of empire as an evangelising project and reverses the power relations embodied in colonial proselytism.’<sup>509</sup> Clearly, in successfully marketing the image of the exotic ‘other,’ Haroon can claim a small personal victory for the subversion of such power relations; yet in reinforcing the stereotype, he simultaneously reaffirms the narrative of discrimination that ensures the marginalisation of non-British cultures. Seated in Eva’s front room, his parodic creation is instantly recognisable to, and authenticated by, the surrounding suburban collective:

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<sup>508</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p.3

<sup>509</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p.123

The man said in a loud whisper to his friend, ‘Why has our Eva brought this brown Indian here? Aren’t we going to get pissed?’  
‘He’s going to give us a demonstration of the mystic arts!’  
‘And has he got his camel parked outside?’  
‘No, he came on a magic carpet’ (p.12).

While for Haroon the performance is pure lampoon, any sense of parody is lost upon his audience as his Eastern creation only reinforces the stereotype of the exotic ‘other’. Indeed, the sense of identity as performance and the associated problems of conforming to or subverting social expectations, are key concerns of the novel, and are explored later in the text as Karim embarks upon a theatrical career. Subject to typecasting, Karim’s portrayal of an ‘authentic’ Indian Mowgli in many ways parallels Haroon’s affected identity. Indeed, in adopting the persona as a means to further his acting career, it could be argued that Karim, like his father, exploits racial prejudices and thus goes some way to subvert the power relations that underlie dominant conceptions of contemporary cultural identities. Seemingly oblivious to the similarities to his own ‘exotic’ performance, Haroon condemns Karim’s portrayal, aligning it to the racist depictions of earlier decades, describing it as ‘an awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White Minstrel’ (p.157).

The justification through which Haroon is able to distinguish his own contrived performance from Karim’s is not readily available. Indeed the sins that Karim’s childhood friend Jamelia accuses his performance of – ‘pandering to prejudices [...] and clichés about Indians’ (p.157) – are those very traits that serve to authenticate, and thus make successful, Haroon’s own Eastern creation. The failure of Haroon to recognise that his own performance is just as complicit in perpetuating racist stereotypes as Karim’s, illustrates the contesting nature of post-migrant identity; while Karim’s depiction is problematic in its racist assertions, Haroon’s portrayal, which is arguably just as ill-conceived, is seemingly ‘not that kind of’ performance. Certainly, reflections upon the conflicting perceptions of racial identity extend beyond considerations of the premeditated performances by Haroon and Karim and expose, as in *White Teeth*, the manifest contradictions of an alleged liberal multiculturalism.

Just as Archie and Clara’s inter-racial marriage seemingly encapsulates the utopian vision of integration, so too Karim’s parents might be thought of as exemplars of an emergent liberal multiculturalism. Like Archie, however, Margaret’s



multicultural credentials are instantly called into question by the selective manner in which she embraces cultural inclusion. Indeed, aligned with Archie's stance, Margaret's multicultural philosophy is likewise founded upon the distinction that separates those worthy of integration from the other 'kind'. Referring to his privileged background, she seemingly justifies her choice of spouse, and thus her decision to enter into an inter-racial marriage; for Haroon, like Samad and Clara, is 'not that kind of' migrant:

If Mum was irritated by Dad's aristocratic uselessness, she was also proud of his family. 'They're higher than the Churchills,' she said to people. 'He went to school in a horse-drawn carriage.' This ensured there would be no confusion between Dad and the swarms of Indian peasants who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and of whom it was said they were not familiar with cutlery and certainly not with toilets. [...] Unlike them, Dad was sent to England by his family to be educated (p.24).

As in *White Teeth*, the sense in which cultural integration emerges as a subjective process that is determined by an equally subjective set of criteria, exposes the fanciful utopianism of an all-encompassing multicultural vision. In assessing Haroon and Samad in isolation from the more general conceptions of their associated migrant communities (in other words, in treating them as individuals, rather than as members of a specific cultural or racial collective), the attitudes encapsulated by Margaret and Archie suggest that integration is possible only on an individual level; they display not cultural tolerance, but rather have the capability to be tolerant of an individual's culture, providing, of course, that s/he is 'not that kind of' individual. Moreover, in distinguishing Haroon from the 'swarms of Indian peasants' relocating to Britain, Margaret at once reaffirms the existence of a latent racism that pervades British society and ensures the continued prejudicial stereotyping of 'those kind of Indians.'

This inconsistent practice of integration, that at once advocates cultural equality whilst simultaneously relying upon, and thus further nurturing, a discourse of racism, is adopted also by Margaret's sister Jean and brother-in-law Ted. While they express their discomfort with his recent 'guru exploit' (p.34) and how it might impact

upon them, their relationship with Haroon presents the façade of racial harmony.<sup>510</sup> Like the ‘multicultural’ stance adopted by Archie, however, the attitude towards racial harmony embraced by Ted and Jean is seemingly determined by the extent to which they are able to isolate Haroon from his specific cultural affiliation and bestow upon him a replacement anglicised identity. Commenting upon his father’s integration into Margaret’s family, Karim notes:

Ted and Jean never called Dad by his Indian name, Haroon Amir. He was always ‘Harry’ to them, and they spoke of him as Harry to other people. It was bad enough his being an Indian in the first place, without having an awkward name too. They’d called Dad Harry from the first time they’d met him, and there was nothing Dad could do about it (p.33).

Mirrored by Samad’s reluctant metamorphosis into the more socially palatable ‘Sam’, the anglicised transformation of Haroon to ‘Harry’, and Ted and Jean’s apparent refusal to acknowledge their brother-in-law’s Pakistani origins, suggests a model of multiculturalism that necessitates the policies of assimilation over integration.

Clearly, the liberal attitude that Ted and Jean embrace is instantaneously undermined by the existence of a latent racism; it is an anglicised, dehistoricised ‘Harry’ that is welcomed into the family, rather than Haroon and his ‘Indian’ cultural baggage. For Jean, the appearance of possessing cultural tolerance is ostensibly more important than its actual fulfilment. Broaching the subject to Karim of her disapproval of Haroon’s moonlighting as an Eastern guru, Jean is keen to ensure that her enlightened stance toward cultural diversity is made clear from the outset, thus preventing her comments from being misconstrued as in any way racist. However, her assertion that ‘we’ve always quite liked your dad, and we never had no objections to him marrying Margaret’ is appended with an apparent recourse to essentialist discourse, as Jean effectively homogenises Haroon as ‘other’ with her comment that ‘some people didn’t like her marrying a coloured (p.44). Despite proclamations of

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<sup>510</sup> Certainly, the bond between Haroon and Ted emerges as particularly strong. Having been judged by Ted to be ‘wise’, Haroon is quickly established as his confidant, and the couple embark upon ‘truth sessions’ where they discuss ‘Jean’s heavy drinking, or her affair with a young local councillor, or how [Ted’s] life was beginning to seem futile, or how unsatisfied he felt’ (p.35). While Haroon again subverts the power relations ‘embodied in colonial proselytism’ by using the sessions to his own advantage, the development of a friendship that is based upon mutual trust, suggests the successful execution of integration.

tolerance, Jean's declaration of acceptance is instantaneously undercut by the existence of a discomfiting 'knotty feeling' that ultimately nullifies the liberalism of the intended sentiment.

More obvious, if only to Karim and the reader, is the cultural intolerance embodied by Ted which, coupled with his genuine affection for both Haroon and Karim, again emphasises the subjective and often contradictory embodiment of the multicultural vision. While the close bond he forms with both Haroon and Karim suggests the possession of a certain level of liberalism, the racial slurring and violent act of hooliganism conducted by Ted on his and Karim's trip to a football match, exposes his fundamental cultural intolerance. In regarding 'Harry' and Karim as individuals isolated from any specific cultural affiliations, Ted effectively distinguishes them from those other marginalised communities, 'them blacks' (p.43), that warrant his disaffection; they are 'not that kind of' migrant. The selective racism embodied by Ted and Jean, along with the more overt racism displayed by characters such as Hairy Back, suggests the existence within contemporary Britain of a pervasive counternarrative that undermines the realisation of the utopian multicultural vision.

Representative of the divergent attitudes symptomatic of an increasingly heterogeneous Britain, the latent narrative of racism that is encapsulated by such characters is contrasted with a problematic discourse of affected anti-racism, typified in the novel by the enthusiasm of Eva to embrace and nurture Haroon and Karim's 'authentic' cultural identities. As Moore-Gilbert argues, while 'the attitudes of characters like Helen and Eva in *The Buddha* are clearly preferable to those of Hairy Back or Auntie Jean [...] they are consistently linked to an unhealthy veneration of cultures of non-western origin, which is often expressed in the language of a patronising exoticism.'<sup>511</sup> Eva's contrived adoration is made apparent throughout the text, but is first exposed by Margaret who justifies her refusal to accompany Haroon to Eva's evening of Eastern philosophy, by commenting that 'She ignores me. [...] I'm not Indian enough for her. I'm only English' (p.5). Eva's alleged reverence for the authentically exotic is seemingly confirmed as she greets a flamboyantly dressed Karim with 'you are so exotic, so original! It's such a contribution' (p.9). While Eva's veneration of all things exotic is seemingly incomparable to the overt forms of racism directed toward Karim by the likes of Hairy Back and his fellow classmates,

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<sup>511</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, pp.137-138

both attitudes have at their foundation a shared perception of migrant identity as mysteriously ‘other’; and while for Eva the sense of otherness is enticing, it nonetheless homogenises individuals into easy to grasp categories, much as the more overtly malevolent attitude does.

The problematic manifestation of such anti-racist attitudes is similarly explored within *White Teeth*. Magid and Millat’s music teacher, Poppy Burton-Jones seemingly mirrors the enthusiasm of Eva to uncover and explore the ‘authentic’ Orient. Keen to convey her liberal attitude, Burton-Jones enthusiastically supports Samad’s motion to have the school remove the Harvest Festival from its calendar on account of its ‘pagan roots’ (p.131), and is eager to reveal to him her admiration for his ‘Indian’ culture. Accosting him after the meeting, she suggests that they might meet to discuss further plans to ensure the school’s multicultural outlook, and reflecting upon Samad’s proposed motion, comments that: ‘I’m really interested in Indian culture. I just think those festivals you mentioned would be so much more ... colourful, and we could tie it in with art work, music. It could be really exciting.’ The emphasis upon the exoticism of his culture, along with her homogenising misrecognition of Samad as Indian, exposes the patronising anti-racist attitude of Burton-Jones, and so subsequently undermines the sense of cultural liberalism that she seeks to convey. Although initially disappointed when Samad reveals that he is from Bangladesh rather than India, she dismisses the distinction, and deploying Orientalist reasoning, reignites her veneration by surmising that Bangladesh is in the ‘same sort of ball-park’ as India (p.133). As she comes to idealise Samad, and by implication his culture, more and more, so she serves to reinforce the established perception of ‘Oriental’ culture as antithetical to Western normality.

A more obvious example of the problematic expression of anti-racist sentiment can be found in Smith’s depiction of the Chalfen family. First encountered at the parent-governor meeting sabotaged by Samad, Marcus and Joyce Chalfen, ‘an ageing hippy couple both dressed in pseudo-Indian garb’ (p.133), appear initially, like Burton-Jones, to be impassioned liberals. Similarly to Burton-Jones, and indeed *Buddha*’s Eva, however, the façade of cultural liberalism that Marcus and Joyce project is undermined by the belief systems, or in this case the Chalfenist ideologies, that motivate their actions. While keen to embrace Irie, and particularly Millat, into their family, the Chalfens’ perception of the pair is undoubtedly founded upon socially established racial and class-based preconceptions. Moreover, Joyce’s patronising

adoration of Millat – she remarks that he ‘look[s] very exotic’ (p.319) and comments upon his resemblance to Omar Sharif thirty years ago’ (p.320) – suggests the manifestation of the type of anti-racism explored in *Buddha*. Indeed, while Alsana frets that the Chalfens are ‘Englishifying’ Millat (p.345), Joyce’s adoration of the boy is actually founded upon the extent to which he embodies values that are completely alien to her own. Irie notes that despite embracing Chalfenism, Joyce is far less interested in her than she is with the unChalfenist behaviour of Millat:

The more Millat veered off the rails – turning up uninvited on a Sunday night, off his face, bringing round girls, smoking weed all over the house, drinking their 1964 Dom Perignon on the sly, pissing on the rose garden, holding a KEVIN meeting in the front room, running up a three hundred pound phone bill calling Bangladesh, telling Marcus he was queer, threatening to castrate Joshua, calling Oscar a spoilt little shit, accusing Joyce herself of being a maniac – the more Joyce adored him (pp.334-335).

For Joyce, the appeal of Millat lies not in the extent to which she might be able to ‘Englishify’ him, but in his potential to expose and further emphasise the superiority of Chalfenism. While ‘Joyce challenge[s] anyone to show her a happier family,’ the self-imposed introversion and social segregation of the Chalfens ensures that there is ‘no one left to admire Chalfenism itself.’ Moreover, the notion of ‘mirrored perfection’ that defines Chalfenism, serves to exacerbate Joyce’s need to be needed. The fact that every Chalfen is able to proclaim him or herself as ‘mentally healthy and emotionally stable,’ negates the need for a nurturing dependence upon mother (pp.313-315). In embracing Millat and his assumed, and occasionally realised, cultural depravity, Joyce is able to at once reaffirm the intellectual and emotional eminence of Chalfenism, and further re-establish her position as nurturer. In the introduction to *Orientalism*, Said suggests that ‘the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.’<sup>512</sup> Likewise, in a relationship that is strikingly Orientalist in tone, we might surmise that Joyce needs Millat precisely in order to define both herself and Chalfenism as his contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.

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<sup>512</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, pp.1-2

The only white family explored in any real depth within the novel, the Chalfens represent the values, and self-importance, of the English middle-classes. Frequently referring to themselves ‘as nouns, verbs and occasionally adjectives’, the introverted family unit that refuses to integrate with a wider society (‘bottom line: the Chalfens didn’t need other people’, p.314), might be thought of as being representative of England and Englishness itself. In an apparent subversion of the anti-racism discussed, Irie comes to idealise the ‘normality’ of the Chalfens in much the same way that Burton-Jones and Joyce Chalfen venerate the exoticism of Samad and Millat respectively:

She had a nebulous fifteen-year-old’s passion for them, overwhelming, yet with no real direction or object. She just wanted to, well, kind of, *merge* with them. She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfenishness. [...] When Irie stepped over the threshold of the Chalfen house, she felt an illicit thrill, like a Jew munching a sausage or a Hindu grabbing a Big Mac. She was crossing borders, sneaking into England (p.328).

In aligning Chalfenishness with Englishness, Irie might similarly be accused of perpetuating cultural homogenisation, albeit in a subversion of typical power relations. Indeed, Irie’s veneration of the Chalfens as representative of pure unalloyed Englishness, is problematised by her apparent refusal to acknowledge the family’s recent cultural history: ‘It didn’t occur to her that the Chalfens were, after a fashion, immigrants too (third generation, by way of Germany and Poland, née Chalfenovsky).’ For Irie, Englishness is not a quality that is predetermined by something as simple as an innate affiliation to a specific geographical location, but rather an attribute that is acquired through virtue of the attitudes and values that one chooses to embrace. Thus, regardless of the family’s cultural background, ‘to Irie, the Chalfens were more English than the English’ (p.328).

Such a view is seemingly at odds with Irie’s later preoccupation with investigating her own cultural history and exploring, via Hortense, her roots within a Jamaican ‘homeland’. As the ‘Englishness’ of the Chalfens was earlier idealised, so Irie quickly reveres her Jamaican heritage, believing that the formation of her true identity lies within its discovery: ‘the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningest of beginnings. Like

the first morning of Eden and the day after the apocalypse' (p.402). The mesmerising spell of homeland, however, quickly dissipates as Irie comes to realise the restrictions that root-based conceptions of identity place upon the self. As epitomised by Irie's vision, and further represented in the tensions inherent to her formation of a politics of identity, the novel, as a speculative narrative, might usefully be thought of as offering an exploration into, and fundamental re-evaluation of, the necessity of 'roots' and the ongoing pursuit to uncover the 'authentic' self.

*White Teeth* might certainly be thought of as a novel that, through exploring the construction of identity through successive generations of post-migrant British nationals, interrogates the reverence of remaining true to one's roots. For Samad, the adherence to one's roots and loyalty to the traditions of one's distinctive cultural history are paramount to the construction of an authentic sense of selfhood. Following an altercation with 'Mad Mary', Samad attempts to appease her racial anguish by defending both his and her right not to assimilate. In recognising the fundamental differences between cultures, Samad reasons that 'your past is not my past and your truth is not my truth' (p.179). The model of racial harmony that Samad apparently advocates – one that is based upon the segregation of divergent cultures – is further supported by his belief in Western culture as an inherently corrupting force, that lures vulnerable individuals from the path of a unified and noble identity, to the temptations and excesses of transient hybridity. Discussing with Archie the 'rebellion' found within young British Muslims, as a means to validate his argument, Samad presents the case of his wife's family:

Take Alsana's sisters – all their children are nothing but trouble. They won't go to mosque, they don't pray, they speak strangely, they eat all kinds of rubbish, they have intercourse with God knows who. No respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption (p.190).

For Samad, with integration comes the fundamental loss of traditional, and thus pure, identity. In this respect his character is particularly interesting, and through the inconsistencies of his approach, he comes to represent the often contradictory nature of contemporary multicultural identity; for while he at once proclaims the importance of maintaining a pure unalloyed identity, his portrayal throughout the novel functions to destabilise such idealist conceptions:

To Samad, as to the people of Thailand, tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles. That didn't mean he could live by them, abide by them or grow in the manner they demanded, but roots were roots and roots were good (p.193).

While the need to remain loyal to his roots, and moreover to have his distinct personal history acknowledged and thus validated by a wider society, borders upon obsession (as seen in his discussions leading to the reluctant hanging of his great-grandfather's portrait in O'Connells), Samad's deviation from tradition (he is a Muslim that rarely attends prayer and conducts inter-marital affairs within non-Muslim women<sup>513</sup>) is perhaps inevitable, and places him within the emergent rebellion that he so vocally seeks to deplore. Indeed, while Samad maintains a strong belief in remaining loyal to the traditions of his roots, his actions suggest the impossibility of doing so within a Western environment.

Moreover, throughout *White Teeth* there are persistent instances that serve to undermine the authority of root-dependent formations of identity, and, as is demonstrated by the development of the characters within the text (Samad to Sam, Magid to 'pukka Englishman', Millat to 'fully paid-up green bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist', p.407), identity is shown to be a constantly evolving process, rather than an innate given. Subsequently, notions of essentialism are challenged as the realisation that 'there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English' (p.327) subverts the authority of root-based loyalty and suggests the inherent fluidity of identity. The inhibitive capacity of adhering to the traditions associated with one's roots is alluded to continually within the narrative. In a letter to Archie for instance, Horst Ibelgaufts<sup>514</sup>, while ostensibly offering a banal account of his recent gardening exploits, provides an insightful attestation to the restrictive nature of the practice:

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<sup>513</sup> Indeed, in naming him Samad, and latterly Sam, Smith is perhaps inviting the reader to draw the comparison between his increasingly corrupt lifestyle and the decadent life of Kureishi's fully-integrated Sammy (*Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*).

<sup>514</sup> The name Smith gives to Archie's absent friend is perhaps not coincidental. Horst Ibelgaufts is an eminent scientist, specialising in the fields of cellular biology and genetic engineering – areas that also feature predominantly within the novel. Within *White Teeth*, Ibelgaufts appears only through the letters that he writes to Archie, yet his presence hangs over the novel as his words of wisdom help to guide the actions of the characters. His (partial) inclusion within the novel is interesting, as the characters' recourse to the wisdom of Ibelgaufts is, by virtue of his name, a recourse to the empiricism of science, as opposed to the randomness of culture.



I have finally gone for the chop and removed that old oak tree from the far corner and I cannot begin to describe to you the difference it has made! Now the weaker seeds are receiving so much more sun and are so healthy I am able even to make cuttings from them [...] I had been suffering under the misapprehension all these years that I was simply an indifferent gardener – when all the time it was that grand old tree, taking up half the garden with its roots and not allowing anything else to grow (p.195).

Roots are here shown to be entirely inhibitive and dangerously pervasive. As they continue to extend throughout the garden, they succeed in preventing the growth of anything but the old oak tree, which casts an increasingly large shadow over the surrounding environment. To relate this to a model of multicultural identity, one could argue that as roots continue to feed a culture, so the omnipotent shadow of tradition continues to loom over its respective community, thus preventing the fertile ground needed to nurture any new growth. An alternative reading might also expose the dangerous implications of assimilation. Commonly regarded as the national tree of England, it is perhaps no coincidence that the tree stifling individual growth in Ibelgauff's garden is an oak. This second reading implies that the rejection of one's roots necessitated by the process of assimilation, is just as problematic, as the shadow of Englishness stunts the growth of any alternative, individual identity. In refusing to acknowledge an individual's cultural heritage, individuality is overshadowed by a collective identity, which is determined by the hegemonic native force. Rather than embracing either one extreme, however, *White Teeth* outlines the importance of a politics of identity that acknowledges a compromised form of both. It emphasises the importance of acknowledging individual roots, yet simultaneously illustrates the inevitable formation of hybrid identities (the intertwining of roots) that breach cultural boundaries. Perhaps such an ideology captures the essence of multiculturalism proper.

Exploring the nature of contemporary British South Asian identity, Tahir Abbas suggests that for third generation migrants, 'issues of concern have shifted from cultural assimilation and social integration to religious identity and discrimination.'<sup>515</sup> As a text that traces the varying manifestations of twentieth-century multiculturalism,

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<sup>515</sup> Tahir Abbas, 'British South Asian Muslims: Before and After September 11' in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, ed. Tahir Abbas (London: Zed Books, 2005), p.13

such a shift would appear evident in *White Teeth*. Certainly, the significance of uncovering family history and remaining loyal to one's roots continue to be concerns primarily of the older generation of characters within the text. While their respective quests to establish an authentic cultural identity are clearly not without problem, the Samads and Hortenses of the novel are juxtaposed with the younger generation of characters, for whom race and culture constitute merely 'the backdrop of daily life rather than the defining characteristic[s] of existence.'<sup>516</sup> For this emergent generation, rootlessness materialises as something not to be fought against, but rather as a banal inevitability of multicultural life. Deploying the *Reader's Digest Encyclopedia* to verify her claims, Alsana challenges Samad's essentialist understanding of what it means to be Bengali, and thus undermines those associated (postcolonial) belief systems attesting to the importance of authentic root-dependent identities. She argues, 'you go back and back and back and it's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe' (p.236). Samad's obsessive desire to remain true to his 'authentic' culture, is here shown to be flawed, since for the multicultural generation *plurality* is the defining human 'essence'. As experienced by the preceding migrant generation, however, the emergence of cultural hybridity is not always a cause for celebration.

Tracing the formation of Black identity within British literature, Mark Stein suggests that '*White Teeth* celebrates a metropolis in which all are strangers and yet all can be at home, a world where different heritages can be juggled within the same neighbourhood, within the same household, and within the same person.' The portrayal of such a liberal multiculturalism, he argues, 'helps us to imagine a world where "Indian" and "English" do not refer back to an essentialized identity.'<sup>517</sup> Certainly, the novel seeks to undermine the essentialised constructions of identity that had previously haunted postcolonial narratives, yet the extent to which the rootlessness of the emergent metropolis is celebrated is questionable. Within the city, as seen in Chapter 3 of this study, cultural dislocation remains rife, and the plurality of (multicultural) identity serves, as Irie experiences, to reaffirm the individual's liminal status. Having inherited 'Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame' (p.265), Irie remains exterior to traditional British conceptions of the (female) self: 'there was England, a

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<sup>516</sup> Simon Hattenstone, 'White Knuckle Ride'

<sup>517</sup> Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004), p.xii

gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land' (p.266). The sense of cultural dislocation coupled with the inability to recognise oneself within the iconography of Western society, and indeed the inability to *be* recognised, are notions that are typically explored within earlier narratives within the post-migrant tradition (as explored in the previous chapter). Regardless of the extent to which Irie strives to adopt British culture over and above the traditions of her Jamaican roots, her physical appearance ensures her social exclusion; no amount of Westernisation will enable the 'transformation from Jamaican hourglass heavy with the sands that gather round Dunn River Falls, to *English Rose*' (pp.266-267). In this sense the novel assesses the extent to which multiculturalism has failed to eradicate cultural and racial essentialism. Indeed, while multiculturalist ideology advocates the projection of identity as a fluid concept, the public perception of the 'Other' remains precisely that: an antithetical identity, formed through essentialised, and entirely homogenous, preconceptions. Subsequently, an individual's racial or cultural identity will ultimately be the determining factor enabling or disabling their acceptance into wider society.

Interrogating the impact of 9/11 upon the perception of the non-British national, Gilroy suggests that the liminal status of the migrant individual serves to account for the increasing emergence of British radicals. He argues:

They have been among us, but they were never actually of us. [...] They are traitors because immigrants are doomed in perpetuity to be outsiders. Becoming an enemy terrorist only makes explicit what was already implicit in their tragic and marginal position. Irrespective of where they are born, even their children and grandchildren will never really belong.<sup>518</sup>

Regardless of their place of birth, or seemingly the extent to which they adopt British culture as their own, the notion of belonging nowhere continues to characterise migrant existence. In this respect, the emergence of British-born, or even British-residing radicalists, makes explicit the fundamental failure of multiculturalist ideology, hence the plethora of claims attesting to its post-9/11 demise. As demonstrated in *White Teeth* and previously in Kureishi's *The Black Album* and *My Son the Fanatic*, the turn to radicalism is not associated specifically with the current

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<sup>518</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, p.134

global context of terrorism; rather, the long-established perception, and partial identity, of the immigrant, emphasises the perpetual (and specifically pre-9/11) failure of lived multiculturalism to realise the utopianism of its ideology. The continual recourse to essentialist discourse ensures that migrant identity remains both partial and volatile, as is saliently depicted in the novel through the characterisation of Millat. Encapsulating the complex and contradictory nature of hybrid identity, Millat, whose character – similarly to *My Son the Fanatic*'s Farid and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*'s Changez – is determined in equal measures by the influences of both Hollywood and Islam, is undoubtedly a victim of such racial essentialism:

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; [...] that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized that anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands (pp.233-234).

For Millat, the failure of multicultural society to acknowledge him in any form other than a racist caricature, leads him to ascribe to a more radical politics of identity. As Gilroy argues, 'in coping with identity crisis [...] people rally to those with similar ancestry, religion, language, values, and institutions and distance themselves from those with different ones.'<sup>519</sup> That Millat's turn to Islam is itself based upon notions of essentialism – 'people like Millat' – is not coincidental, and again reinforces claims attesting to the failure of multiculturalist ideology.

Similarly to Shahid and Chad in *The Black Album*, Millat's dubious religious conversion might be viewed not as the epiphanic return to a neglected faith, but rather a clear revolt against the 'host' society that has predetermined his fragmented and liminal identity. In recognising aspects of himself within the images of the protestors, Millat emphasises the growing sense of cultural separatism that continues to pervade Western society, whereby a turn to radicalism equates not to a return to faith, but

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<sup>519</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, p.126

rather to the potential to establish a coherent, and acknowledged, identity. As he struggles to purge himself of ‘the taint of the West’ (p.444), his conversion to Islam is undermined as he considers the motivations behind his recent affiliation to KEVIN, a radical Islamic faction with ‘an acronym problem’ (p.295): ‘He had joined KEVIN because he loved clans (and the outfit and the bow tie), and he loved clans at war’ (p.442). Indeed, while his faith in Islam fails to extend beyond the exultation of Muhammad as ‘a right geezer’ (p.444), his loyalty to the faction remains undisputed. Furthermore, his questionable motivations for joining appear to be shared by his fellow radicals, who despite frequent proclamations to the contrary, themselves show little commitment to Muslim doctrine. Mohammed Hussein-Ishmael’s conversion to KEVIN, for instance, is a result of a (misdirected) sense of pride – ‘he was just flattered, downright flattered, that he should be considered sufficiently successful a Muslim businessman to ponce money off’ (p.471) – and a desire to seek revenge upon the continual acts of theft and violence wreaked upon him. Similarly, despite claims attesting to his loyalty to the faith, for Shiva the reasons for joining the faction are three-fold:

First, because he was sick of the stick that comes with being the only Hindu in a Bengali Muslim restaurant. Secondly, because being Head of Internal Security for KEVIN beat the hell out of being second waiter at the Palace. And thirdly, for the women. (Not the KEVIN women, who were beautiful but chaste in the extreme, but all the women on the outside who had despaired of his wild ways and were now hugely impressed by his asceticism. They loved the beard, they dug the hat, and told Shiva that at thirty-eight he had finally ceased to be a boy) (p.502).

For the members of KEVIN, their loyalty to the Muslim faith functions primarily as a façade, masking, with a limited degree of success, the true incentive of the group: namely, to protest against those hegemonic ideologies that ensure Western dominance, and through establishing a powerful counter-narrative, so validate their own identity. In this respect, the resurgence of radical sects within contemporary Western society does not necessarily signify the death of multiculturalism; rather the continued existence of such groups serves to expose the exacerbation of the inherent failings of the implementation of the ideology. Perhaps Gilroy’s previously quoted claims

attesting to the premature abandonment of multiculturalism are here justified; the realisation of the ideology is seemingly doomed from its inception. For Modood, however, the cultural rift that characterises contemporary Western society demands that the values of multiculturalism are preserved. Predicting that the twenty-first century will ‘be one of unprecedented ethnic and religious mix in the West’, he argues that ‘if we are to keep alive the prospect of a dynamic, internally differentiated multiculturalism within the context of democratic citizenship, then we must at least see that multiculturalism is not the cause of the present crisis, but part of the solution.’<sup>520</sup>

Some two years previously, however, Modood, exploring the implications of contemporary multiculturalism, had emphasised the need within British society to acknowledge commonality, stating that ‘British anti-racists and multiculturalists have indeed been too prone to ignore this.’<sup>521</sup> Rather than encapsulating specific multicultural ideologies, the call to recognise those traits that are uniformly evident within *all* British residents, might be more in line with an emergent form of cosmopolitanism. Certainly, such an approach would seemingly allow for the materialisation of a politics of identity that, in focussing upon shared traits, enables individuals and migrant communities to adopt a more positive, and socially acknowledged, identity. As outlined in Irie’s vision, such an identity would be emancipated from the shackles of history and cultural expectation; ‘roots won’t matter any more.’

#### **5.4 Anticipating Cosmopolitanism: *The Autograph Man***

Distinct from multiculturalism’s celebration of diversity, cosmopolitan ideology appeals to a common sense of human solidarity, whereby the acknowledgment of a shared experience as members of the same species takes precedence over those cultural and racial differences that have previously divided the human race. Ostensibly indicating the return to humanist doctrine, and the emergence of ‘species consciousness’ cosmopolitanism ‘refers to those basic values which set down

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<sup>520</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*, p.154

<sup>521</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p.206

standards or boundaries which no agent, whether a representative of a global body, state or civic association, should be able to violate.<sup>522</sup> The hybrid, culturally defined subjectivities that are fostered through multiculturalist ideology are, within the cosmopolitan vision, usurped by a global politics of identity that promotes the sense of an all-inclusive planetary, or species consciousness. As explored within Chapter 3, however, the actuation of such a philosophy is intensely problematic. With a specific emphasis upon the recognition of individuals as first and foremost members of a global species, the extent to which cosmopolitanism amounts to anything more than ‘racial harmony’ rebranded needs to be questioned; in placing value on a common sense of belonging over and above individual identity, cosmopolitan ideologies might be accused of displaying the same cultural blindness. Moreover, the assumed existence of a set of universal ‘basic values’ upon which the cosmopolitan ideal is founded, is highly problematic, since it suggests the presence of a globally omnipotent force that evaluates the acceptability of such principles; increasingly this force has become synonymous with Western powers. Functioning under the guise of humanism and championing the inception of a global community, cosmopolitanism might be more accurately conceived as ‘a new Western strategy in its long-term quest to dominate the rest of the globe.’<sup>523</sup>

Casting aside concerns relating to the re-emergence of Western forces of imperialism, the actual implementation of cosmopolitan ideologies is, like the accomplishment of a philosophy of species consciousness, problematised by the inherently fractured state of society. While processes of globalisation highlight the need for a philosophy that has the capacity to transcend the limitations of race, nationality and cultural affiliation, the reality of the deeply divided condition of humankind affirms the idealist utopianism of the cosmopolitan project. As Guibernau contends, ‘in so far as humanity remains fractured by deep social, political and economic cleavages, such as those currently in place, it would be impossible to envisage the rise of a cosmopolitan culture, let alone a shared cosmopolitan identity beyond the remit of a privileged elite.’<sup>524</sup> This is perhaps precisely why Irie’s fleeting vision remains within the realm of the imagination. Despite her desire for a time

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<sup>522</sup> David Held, ‘Cultural Diversity, Cosmopolitan Principles and the Limits of Sovereignty’ in *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation*, p.157

<sup>523</sup> Montserrat Guibernau, ‘National Identity Versus Cosmopolitan Identity’ in *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation* p.149

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid*, p.154

when ‘roots won’t matter any more’, the novel – particularly the manner in which its characters struggle to establish an identity that is not, at least in part, determined by their cultural background – demonstrates the impossibility of the realisation of her vision, in much the same way that, through Samad, it suggests the impossibility of remaining loyal to one’s roots. This is perhaps why Irie’s vision is only ephemeral and remains within the realm of the imagination, for seemingly the goals of cosmopolitanism remain as decidedly unachievable as those of multiculturalism.

Smith’s second novel, *The Autograph Man* might best be perceived as a text that explores the excesses of celebrity culture and contemporary consumerism; yet the multifarious issues of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism pervade the text, and serve to highlight the many implications of the ideologies. Despite traversing London and New York, both cosmopolitan hubs, Alex-Li Tandem, a Chinese autograph dealer and lapsed Jew, appears throughout to be ill at ease with his hybrid background, and spends much of the novel searching for a more stable and unified identity. Indeed, as in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, Alex’s quest to track down the elusive autograph of Kitty Alexander and thus prove himself within his field, is paralleled by the search to establish and validate his own identity. Indeed, his ongoing work on his book *Jewishness and Goyishness*, might be interpreted as being less a social study interrogating the nuances of Jewish and non-Jewish subjectivity, and more an introspective investigation into the nature of his own complex identity. Moreover, with an increasing preoccupation with the ‘goyish’ thread of his identity, ‘in the book, as in his life, Jewishness was seeping away.’<sup>525</sup> In as much as an unalloyed sense of self is shown to be inconceivable, the difficulties that Alex experiences in producing a balanced study that explores ‘Jewishness’ and ‘Goyishness’ equally, reflects the erosion of cultural boundaries typified by late-twentieth century ‘liberal’ Western society; as in *White Teeth*, identity is shown to be problematically hybridised. Certainly, the novel as a whole is seemingly at pains to emphasise the inherent fluidity of contemporary (multicultural) subjectivity. As Alex reflects upon the transformation of his friend Adam from an eclectic array of childhood personas to a ‘handsome, bright, enlightened’ adult, identity is shown to be a continual process of, often contradictory, evolution and revolution:

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<sup>525</sup> Zadie Smith, *The Autograph Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2002:2003), p.91



What happened to that fat weird freak Black Jew kid? Who lurched from one ill-fitting 'identity' to another every summer; going through hippiedom, grunge, gansta-lite, various *rootisms* (Ebonics, Repatriation, Rastafarianism), Anglo-philia, Americanization, afros, straightened, corn-rowed, shaved, baggy jeans, tight jeans, white girls, black girls, Jew girls, Goy girls, conservatism, Conservatism, socialism, anarchism, partying, drugging, hermiting, schizing, rehabbing – how did he get from there to *this*? How did he get so *happy*? (p.129).

The process of searching for an identity that 'fits' is an important motif of the novel, and gestures towards *Autograph Man*'s place within a very specific post-migrant tradition. Indeed the interchangeable manifestations of Adam's teenage self are redolent of the problematic process of being that is explored in Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia*. Recalling the various personae of his teenage self, Karim emphasises the constantly shifting identity that is characteristic of the post-migrant experience: 'Yeah, sometimes we were French, Jammie and I, and other times we went black American. The thing was, we were supposed to be English, but to the English we were always wogs and nigs and Pakis and the rest of it' (p.53). The problematic process of belonging, of establishing a sense of self that is validated by a wider society that is at best indifferent and at worst hostile, is an issue that Smith explores in all three of her novels: primarily, although not exclusively, through the characters of Irie and Millat (*White Teeth*), Alex and Adam (*The Autograph Man*) and Levi and Carl (*On Beauty*). Significantly, while the speculative texts gesture towards the genre of Bildungsroman, all three novels refuse to offer the neat conclusion that typifies the style. Certainly, it is the *process*, rather than the realisation, of becoming that is key to each of the novels. Alex's questioning of how to achieve a valid and fulfilled sense of self – 'how did he get so happy?' – encapsulates the very essence of the multicultural dilemma; as Stuart Hall asks, 'how then can the particular and the universal, the claims of both difference and equality be recognized? This is the dilemma, and the conundrum – the multi-cultural question – at the heart of the multi-cultural's transruptive and reconfigurative impact.'<sup>526</sup>

Similarly to *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*'s engagement with multiculturalism is not merely synoptic; rather it additionally draws attention to the

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<sup>526</sup> Stuart Hall 'Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural Question' in *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, 'Transruptions'* p.211

often contradictory actuation of multiculturalist ideologies. While identity is at once shown to be multiple and constantly shifting, the novel simultaneously exposes the continued recourse within British and American society to modes of essentialism. The text is replete with observations and gestures that ostensibly reinforce the existence of homogenous, intrinsically recognisable, perceptions of cultural and national identities: ‘Americans are so efficient’; or ‘Alex was nodding in that meek English way’ (p.158). Furthermore, as Alex frequently discovers, the possession of an identity that is socially acknowledged (one is identified by one’s Jewishness, whiteness, Britishness, etc.), brings with it the weight of expectation. Indeed, throughout much of the novel, Alex struggles to free himself from the expectations that society places on him as a result of his religious and cultural background. Repeatedly admonished by Adam and Rubinfine for the apparent abandonment of his Jewish heritage, Alex is continually reminded of the need to socially perform, and thus verify, his ‘authentic’ Jewish identity. Indeed, despite Alex’s efforts to forge an independent identity that is able to liberate him from the shackles of his Jewish background, there are frequent instances throughout the text that suggest the impossibility of transcending the cultural boundaries of one’s heritage. Browsing through the catalogue of Americana offered at a London auction house, for instance, Lovelear, an American collector, expresses his frustration to Alex at the policy of selling to ‘foreigners’ the artefacts of his nation:

The thing is, the *thing is*, this is *part of my culture*. And it is *Just! Not! Possible!* to understand a lot of this stuff unless you come from the place where this stuff comes from! And you can put a Jimmy Stewart in your Hung Win Shan Chin office in Tokyo or wherever, but you are *never – never!* – going to understand what a Jimmy Stewart *means*. Nothing against anyone but no nip can truly understand what a Jimmy Stewart means truly in his heart of hearts (pp.107-108).

Aside from the racist overtone of his argument, Lovelear implies that individuals are effectively bound by their cultural heritage, and therefore any attempt to understand the culture of another is necessarily ill-fated. Clearly, the foundations of such a notion are based upon the same homogenising modes of essentialism that Alex, in his search for a positive identity, struggles to transcend. Despite the liberal politics of identity that he seemingly embraces, however, Alex too is shown to be guilty of perpetuating

the simplistic formula of cultural homogenisation. Hearing the name of the new inhabitant of the flat below his own, Alex is both surprised and disappointed when he realises that Anita Chang ‘wasn’t sentimental like him, or interested in shared-race, or coincidence, or shared racial coincidence’ (p.146). Likewise, when meeting Honey Richardson, a notorious prostitute and trader of celebrity paraphernalia, Alex is surprised to learn of her Buddhist faith. With her demeanour failing to correspond to the essentialised image he associates with the religion, Alex, in an attempt to temper Honey’s ire over his visible disbelief, concludes that ‘you’re fairly confrontational for a Buddhist, that’s all I meant’ (p.243). Even though such examples serve to undermine the homogenised perceptions of anti-Western cultures – in each instance the reality subverts the expectation – as seen in *White Teeth*, the continual recourse of characters to modes of essentialism, makes explicit the problematic realisation of multiculturalist ideology.

In a similar fashion to Smith’s previous novel, *The Autograph Man* gestures towards the need for an inclusionary philosophy of being that transcends the boundaries of cultural affiliation and nationhood. While in *White Teeth* Irie is only able to imagine an existence free from the fetters of the past, in *The Autograph Man* the trappings of root-dependent constructions of identity are countered, albeit only partially, by the emergence of a more human-centred philosophy. Throughout the text, characters observe and perform a series of ‘International Gestures’, a source of communication that refuses to be defined or restrained by the barriers of language or cultural loyalty. To communicate a feeling of indifference, for instance, Alex can posture his body to form the appropriate gesture: ‘the throwing back of the head, the slight indent of the front teeth on lower lip, the making of the sound *pfui*’ (p.177). That trans-national/cultural communication is enabled through the simple manipulation of the body, emphasises the importance of the human form to the emergence of a truly global identity. Regardless of race or culture, the physical form elucidates that which we all have in common: membership of the species *Homo sapiens*. As with the other speculative fictions explored within this thesis, however, the need for such ‘internationalism’ is *anticipated* within the novel, yet ultimately remains unachievable. The future may belong to crowds, but as such novels emphasise, such a collective consciousness remains elusive within the present.

## 5.5 The Revitalisation of Forsterian Humanism in *On Beauty*

In an apparent continuation of the issues explored within her first two novels, Smith's *On Beauty* raises similar concerns regarding the problematic implementation of multiculturalist ideology, and likewise gestures towards the emergence of a philosophy that transcends the cultural and national boundaries that serve to divide humankind. Indeed, while clearly a novel set and written within a post-9/11 context, the narrative offers a treatment of multiculturalism that is comparable to that outlined within the pre-9/11 landscape. The later novel perhaps lacks the 'cultural innocence' that is often ascribed to Smith's literary debut, yet its portrayal of the problematic politics of identity typified by multicultural subjectivity is readily transferrable across both texts. In his review, John Preston remarks that '*On Beauty* is not really a novel about beauty. Rather, it is about human imperfection and how people constantly fall short of the ideals they set themselves.'<sup>527</sup> In a similar vein to Smith's preceding two novels, one might extend this thesis to include also the weight of expectation that wider society places upon the individual. For while *On Beauty* celebrates, albeit with tongue placed firmly in cheek, the apparent liberalism of Western society, it also seeks to expose the continual recourse, within the formation of a coherent politics of identity, to racial and cultural stereotyping, and thus emphasises the impractical utopianism of a philosophy of collective consciousness.

As many critics have commented, to refer to *On Beauty* as a reworking of a Forsterian classic is to discredit the manner in which Smith has successfully transferred and reappropriated Forster's mode of comic-humanism to the contemporary age. In a review for the New York Times, Michiko Kakutani argues:

Although the plot of *On Beauty* hews remarkably closely to *Howards End*, Smith has managed the difficult feat of taking a famous and beloved classic and thoroughly reinventing it to make the story her own. She has taken a novel about Edwardian England and used it as a launching pad for a thoroughly original tale about families and generational change, about race

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<sup>527</sup> John Preston, 'Winning Ways With Character' in *The Telegraph* (September 15, 2005) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3646486/Winning-ways-with-character.html>> (accessed 29.10.08)

and multiculturalism in millennial America, about love and identity and the ways they are affected by the passage of time.<sup>528</sup>

Certainly, while *On Beauty* is undoubtedly recognisable as having been crafted by Smith, the novel's debt to Forster is indisputable, and thus analyses of the text will invariably be comparative. Both *Howards End* and *On Beauty* are essentially tales that explore the complex nature of humanity and its propensity to divide and organise both individuals and communities into hierarchical categories of existence. Both novels depict a 'doubled world,'<sup>529</sup> whereby a solution is sought to reconcile the competing values of a fractured society; 'to connect' and 'live in fragments no longer.'<sup>530</sup> The clash of cultures depicted in Forster's novel by the liberalism of the Schlegel sisters and the omnipotent conservatism of the Wilcoxes, is duplicated in Smith's text through her portrayal of Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps. As in *Howards End*, the families are brought together and pulled apart, by the failed (anti-) relationship of two of its younger members. In the Forsterian tale, the values of the two families continue to collide as the Wilcoxes purchase a property opposite the Schlegel's home, and similarly in *On Beauty* the disparate principles encapsulated by both families are exacerbated when Monty acquires a job at the same university that employs Howard. Moreover, just as Margaret Schlegel befriends the dying Ruth Wilcox, so Kiki Belsey forms a close bond with Carlene Kipps; the bequeathed *Howards End* in the former novel being replaced by a painting in the latter. Both novels are also intimately concerned with the Forsterian pursuit of beauty and the acquisition of culture: the desire of Leonard Bast to improve himself 'by means of Literature and Art,'<sup>531</sup> being replicated by Carl's wish to 'lay some of [his] Mozart thoughts'<sup>532</sup> on Zora's head. Ultimately in both texts, the goal of societal and cultural reconciliation remains only partially complete: while the Wilcoxes and Schlegels are united through the marriage of Margaret and Henry, the blow to Leonard's head that leads to his death is delivered by Charles Wilcox, thus reinforcing the dominion of the middle- over the working-classes; similarly Carl's elevation to university employee is

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<sup>528</sup> Michiko Kakutani, 'On Beauty: Review' in *The New York Times* (September 17, 2005) <[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/16/arts/16iht-booksat.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/16/arts/16iht-booksat.html?_r=1)> (accessed 29.10.08)

<sup>529</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, 'Introduction' to *A Room with a View*, E.M. Forster (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p.xxiv

<sup>530</sup> E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p.188

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid*, p.65

<sup>532</sup> Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), p.137

short-lived, while Howard's unorthodox attempt to reconcile the Belseys and the Kippses (he has sex with Victoria Kipps at her mother's wake) results in the dissolution of his family. Just as Forster's epigraph to the novel is incomplete ('Only connect...'), so too both novels suggest that societal reconciliation can only ever be partially achieved; which is effectively, not to be achieved at all.

Clearly *On Beauty's* debt to *Howards End*, both structurally and stylistically, is irrefutable, yet prior to exploring the implications of Smith's debt to Forster, it will be useful to consider the novel within the context of her previous work, and so explore the extent to which it might be considered a product of its time, rather than a mere reworking of a celebrated past. Certainly, in an apparent continuation of theme from her previous two novels, *On Beauty* might be thought to offer an interrogation of the claims and manifestations of liberal multiculturalism, whilst highlighting the apparent need within contemporary Western society to embrace an active form of cosmopolitanism, and thus establish and emphasise a philosophy of global consciousness.

Aside from the obvious themes that the novel explores, the multicultural credentials of *On Beauty* are made explicit through the heterogeneous characters that it depicts. The tensions inherent to the implementation of the multiculturalist vision are seemingly encapsulated by the varied, and sometimes conflicting, cultural allegiances that make up the Belsey family. In a review of the novel, James Lasdun interprets the Belseys as a microcosmic representation of contemporary multiculturalism, arguing that the family 'comprises its own little compact multiverse of clashing cultures: the father a white English academic, the mother a black Floridian hospital administrator, one son a budding Jesus freak, the other a would-be-rapper and street hustler, the daughter a specimen of US student culture at its most rampagingly overdriven.'<sup>533</sup> Moreover, as with the characters of Smith's two previous novels, each of the members of the Belsey family, including Howard, might be thought of as being victim to the forms of racial and cultural stereotyping that continue to blight the realisation of the multicultural vision. Certainly, while Wellington is depicted as the very embodiment of multicultural harmony, Kiki assures Carlene, for instance, that 'it's a community-minded kind of place' (p. 87), the liberal perception of the town is undermined by its inhabitants' persistent recourse to an essentialist politics of identity. While largely

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<sup>533</sup> James Lasdun, 'Howards Folly' in *Observer* (September 10, 2005)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/sep/10/fiction.zadiesmith>> (accessed 29.10.08)

accepted into the community, and distinguished from the Haitians that effectively constitute the ‘Other’ within Wellington society, Kiki remains defined by her blackness, and thus her assumed exotic provenance. Acknowledging the social processes that ascribe recognisable identities onto individuals, Kiki concludes: ‘I’m the Aunt Jemima on the cookie boxes [...] the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry played around’ (p.51).

Interestingly as one of the few dominant white characters within the novel, Howard too is subject to such forms of essentialism, which in this case dictate that his perceived identity is reduced to a base formula of caricatured Englishness. Along with the habitual response Howard receives from East Coasters on hearing his accent – a pitiable look, followed by the mundane quip, ‘Cold over there, huh?’ (p.27) – his Englishness is frequently aligned with an assumed aloofness, and while such negative perceptions are often later recognised as being unfounded, the recourse to essentialism remains, as one caricatured identity is merely replaced by another. Referring to the manner in which Howard successfully adopts the role of genial host, guests entering his home that had hitherto equated his Englishness with superciliousness, leave with ‘the new and gratifying impression that not only did Howard Belsey not hate you – as you had always previously assumed – but, in fact, the man had long harboured a boundless admiration of you which only his *natural English reserve* had prevented him from expressing before this night’<sup>534</sup> (p.106).

Similarly to the problematic construction of subjectivity explored within Smith’s previous novels, and indeed many of the novels constituting the (new) post-migrant literary tradition as explored in Chapter 4, *On Beauty* depicts identity to be a continually shifting, and often problematic, process of being. Many of the characters within the text struggle to forge an identity that is not predetermined exclusively by the imposed expectations of their racial or cultural caste. In the sense that he too is victim of wider society’s propensity toward essentialism, there is a clear parallel between Levi Belsey’s need to locate, and have validated, an authentic Black-American identity, and Millat’s struggle to resist the social forces that define his liminal status and instead establish a subversive, although empowered, identity. Just as Millat’s dubious conversion to Islamism is lampooned, so the text emphasises both Levi’s cultural naivety (as demonstrated by his awkward attempts to bond with Choo),

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<sup>534</sup> My italics

and the extent to which his adopted persona is affected, rather than acquired: as Howard considers the varying accents that reverberate around his home, he is struck by Levi's newly adopted 'faux-Brooklyn accent': 'Brooklyn? The Belseys were located two hundred miles north of Brooklyn' (p.11). Moreover, like Millat, despite the cosmopolitan pretensions of his immediate surroundings, Levi is regularly exposed to the prejudices of a society that continues to ascribe to the archaic modes of cultural and racial essentialism. Frequently subject to the scrutinising gaze of his fellow Wellingtonians, Levi light-heartedly contemplates the manner in which he might challenge the stereotype that his physical presence apparently invokes:

Maybe he should buy a T-shirt that just had on it YO – I'M NOT GOING TO RAPE YOU. He could use a T-shirt like that. Maybe like three times each day while on this travels that T-shirt would come in handy. There was always some old lady who needed to be reassured on that point (p.80).

On this occasion, Levi is mistaken by the nature of the gaze, which performed by Carlene Kipps, is one of recognition rather than of suspicion. Yet his refusal to specify the racial identity of the type of 'old lady' that requires reassurance is interesting, as is his impulsive assumption that he is being judged by Carlene. Indeed, when on returning home his claims of victimisation are disputed and Carlene exonerated – primarily on the grounds of her own racial identity – Levi retorts that 'any black lady who be white enough to live on Redwood thinks *'zackly* the same way as any old white lady' (p.85). That the racial background of the assumed perpetrator is here seen to be negligible, seems to suggest the progression of discriminatory attitudes from a form of reductionism based upon skin pigmentation, to an equally malignant form based upon cultural prejudices.

In an essay that interrogates the contemporary manifestations of social discrimination, Chris Allen suggests that 'while racism on the basis of markers of race obviously continues, a shift is apparent in which some of the more traditional and obvious markers have been replaced by newer and more prevalent ones of a cultural, socio-religious nature.'<sup>535</sup> With the noted exception of Jerome's burgeoning Christian faith, religion plays little part in the lives of the novel's characters – which is itself

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<sup>535</sup> Chris Allen, 'From Race to Religion: The New Face of Discrimination' in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, p.49



perhaps a reflection of the purported increased secularism of Western society. However, the fact that of the Belsey children it is only Levi that is subject to the scrutinising gaze of Wellington society, suggests that the pervasive form of ‘racial’ discrimination to which he is victim transcends those manifestations founded upon ‘traditional markers.’ Moreover, despite Levi exposing the typical perpetrator of such prejudice as ‘some old lady,’ that Jerome and Zora are not targeted, ostensibly rules out generational factors; the motivation is not merely that of an older generation despairing of its unruly descendents. Rather, the shift in the mode of discrimination which dictates that only two thirds of the Belsey offspring are (positively) acknowledged by wider society, seems to have as its basis the archaic model of assimilation.

It is perhaps here relevant to revisit, albeit briefly, the theories outlined by Said in *Orientalism*. Tracing the historical manifestation of the West’s attitude toward the ‘Other’, Said argues that ‘Orientalism’ might simply be conceived as the ‘systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.’<sup>536</sup> As an antithetical creation, Western perceptions of the Orient serve to emphasise the dominance of Western sovereignty. Moreover, Orientalist discourse functions as a means to further validate a sense of global division; narratives provided ‘proof’ that ‘the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”’, and thus by contrast, ‘the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal”.’<sup>537</sup> As a means to distinguish between its ideological conception and the ramifications of its actual implementation, Said proposes the existence of latent and manifest Orientalisms. Manifest Orientalism correlates to the latter distinction, and refers to the range of discourses that constitute Orientalist ‘knowledge’ at specific points in history. Latent Orientalism, on the other hand, refers to those Orientalist ideologies that remain impervious to contextual influences; while manifest Orientalism is context dependent, and thus necessarily variable, its underlying, or latent, ideology remains constant.

As we have seen, such a theory of Orientalism remains crucial to contemporary interpretations of multiculturalism. While Allen proclaims a recent transition from forms of racial discrimination that are based upon skin colour to those founded upon

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<sup>536</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p.3

<sup>537</sup> Ibid

cultural and socio-religious prejudice, the overbearing ideology of intolerance persists. Furthermore, while the nature of discrimination depicted within *On Beauty* suggests a movement away from a form of prejudice founded upon ‘traditional markers’, the latent ideologies that determine its earlier manifestation remain prevalent. To place the argument with an Orientalist framework, we might argue that Levi is subject to the gaze of the Occident – represented by the local residents of Wellington – since, unlike his elder siblings who are both firmly established within the Western education system, he remains, partially at least, unassimilated. Indeed, his contrived search for an ‘authentic’ Black-American identity seemingly affirms that he is ‘if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West.’<sup>538</sup>

The underlying tone of cultural prejudice that permeates the outwardly liberal façade of Wellington society, again serves to emphasise the problematic gap between the utopianism of both multiculturalist and cosmopolitan visions and the conflicting nature of their contemporary manifestations. Moreover, just as many of the fictions explored previously propose the need for an inclusive human-centred philosophy that transcends the boundaries of culture and nationhood, so *On Beauty* similarly suggests the demand for a global ideology that enables the unification of a fundamentally fractured world. Although the emergent form of cosmopolitanism that the novel depicts is clearly flawed (the alleged liberalism of Wellington College, for instance, is starkly contrasted with the surrounding urban environment which is characterised by poverty, crime and social injustice), the very form of the novel announces its humanist pretensions. A novel that is described in its acknowledgments an ‘*hommage*’ to Forster, one might want to argue that Smith’s reappropriation of the style and form of *Howards End* is a reaction against the increasingly fragmented world that has come to typify the postmodern, and indeed post-9/11 moment.

In his study *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), Said notes the apparent post-9/11 resurgence of (manifest) Orientalism. He affirms that ‘in the United States, the principal emphasis has been on the distinction between our good and their evil. [...] We are civilized’, the argument follows, ‘they are barbarians.’<sup>539</sup> In order to counter the cultural binarism that such a view projects, Said calls for the

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<sup>538</sup> Ibid, p.40

Parallels are again evident between the portrayal of Levi as in need of corrective assimilation and the attempted ‘Chalfenisation’ of Millat.

<sup>539</sup> Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p.8

emergence within the humanities of a form of democratic criticism that encapsulates an unfettered, and thus authentic, humanism. He argues that ‘we are bombarded by prepackaged and reified representations of the world that usurp and preempt democratic critique, and it is to the overturning and dismantling of these alienating objects that [...] the intellectual humanist’s work ought to be devoted.’<sup>540</sup> He further contends that the task of the contemporary humanist is ‘not just to occupy a position or place, nor simply to belong somewhere, but rather to be both insider and outsider to the circulating ideas and values that are at issue in our society or someone else’s society or the society of the other.’<sup>541</sup> In much the same way as the cosmopolitan vision transcends national and cultural affiliations, so the form of humanism outlined by Said is necessarily free from the constraints and influences of any ideological allegiance. To this effect, Said suggests that ‘if I were forced to choose for myself as humanist the role either of patriotically “affirming” our country [...] or non-patriotically questioning it, I would undoubtedly choose the role of questioner.’<sup>542</sup> While written within the specific context of post-9/11 America, Said’s democratic vision maps neatly onto the humanist philosophies embraced previously by Forster. Indeed, the repudiation of blind patriotism that is necessary to Said’s vision is reminiscent of Forster’s pledge that ‘if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.’<sup>543</sup> Emerging at the apparent inception of a new world order, Smith’s reappropriation of Forster is perhaps timely.

While *On Beauty* is explicitly a work of homage, however, the influence of Forster is not limited to this novel alone. The authorial voice that is common to all three of Smith’s novels is typically Forsterian, and thus Smith’s appeals to his humanism should not be perceived as a specific response to the post-9/11 moment. Lionel Trilling’s description of Forster’s style as that of ‘personal discourse, a middle style, easy and lucid’ which ‘presupposes a reader, and is intended to set the reader at ease and to convince or persuade without bullying’<sup>544</sup>, could just as easily be applied to an account of Smith’s narrative style. In her essay ‘E.M. Forster, Middle Manager’ Smith notes the conversational tone Forster deploys within his non-fictional discourse,

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid, p.71

<sup>541</sup> Ibid, p.76

<sup>542</sup> Ibid, p.77

<sup>543</sup> E.M. Forster, ‘What I Believe’ (1939) in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Penguin Books, 1965:1970), p.76

<sup>544</sup> Lionel Trilling, *E.M. Forster: A Study* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1951), p.30

which is ‘frothy and without academic pretension’<sup>545</sup>; a manner that she herself emulates within her collection of essays. Moreover, the ‘substantial explorations of mockery and seriousness, alternately comic and serious, alternately serious critiques of mockery and mocking critiques of seriousness’<sup>546</sup> that Richard Keller Simon recognises as being typically Forsterian, are additionally traits that characterise Smith’s novels. The socio-cultural issues that Smith interrogates are clearly worthy of such seriousness; yet her novels, like Forster’s, avoid the stolid didacticism typical of social commentary through critiquing and satirising the contradictory ethics of contemporary society. Certainly, the speculative tone of Smith’s fictions and the manner in which they avoid didacticism, are traits that can broadly be applied to many of the fictions of the contemporary moment. With the possible exception of Ali’s *Brick Lane*, the fact that such speculative narratives continue to be written and voraciously consumed within the contemporary moment, not only demonstrates the continued significance of the narrative form, but further destabilises the myth of 9/11 that presumes that fictions published after the event must necessarily possess a heightened seriousness, and that its authors are increasingly responsible for projecting a moral and ethical commentary on the troubled state of society. Despite the Gradgrindian concerns expressed by authors such as McEwan within the immediate aftermath of 9/11, within the first decade of the new millennium, people still want, and indeed *need*, those ‘airy-fairy, wispy inventions.’<sup>547</sup>

The constraints of space prevent me from offering a significant comparative analysis of the novels of Forster and Smith, yet any such study would undoubtedly yield themes and motifs that are transferable across the texts of both authors: the depiction of a ‘doubled world’; the anonymity of life within the city; the emphasis upon accidentalism; the pursuit of beauty; and so on. Despite the multitude of similarities however, the trope that most resoundingly links the authors is the humanist philosophy that both their novels and works of non-fiction embrace and seek to project. Within the works of both Forster and Smith, the portrayal of a fundamentally fractured society is accompanied by a faith in the power of humanity to unite and so

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<sup>545</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘E.M. Forster, Middle Manager’, p.16

<sup>546</sup> Richard Keller Simon, ‘E.M. Forster’s Critique of Laughter and the Comic: The First Three Novels as Dialectic’ in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol.31, No.2/3 E.M. Forster Issue (Summer-Autumn, 1985), p.200

<sup>547</sup> Ian McEwan in ‘The Salon Interview: Ian McEwan’

‘live in fragments no longer’. In an essay that explores the Forsterian influences within her debut novel, Bart Moore-Gilbert argues that Smith

conveys the ‘multiplicity-in-unity’ of multiracial community more confidently than Forster manages in *A Passage to India*. [...] If the conclusion of her mentor’s novel is that the realisation of this ideal is some way off, symbolised in the way that Aziz and Fielding veer away from each other on their last ride, *White Teeth*, by contrast, suggests that Forster’s vision is now achievable.<sup>548</sup>

The remedy to a fractured society, it is this Forsterian belief in a ‘multiplicity-in-unity’ that will enable the emergence of a truly global consciousness. As I have sought to illustrate throughout this study, perhaps it is this apparent resurgence of humanist philosophy, and the manner in which both pre- and post-9/11 fictions anticipate it, that will come to be thought of as the defining characteristic of contemporary British literature. With the myth of 9/11 deconstructed, *I will make one final and surpassingly rash prediction – we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert the human.*

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<sup>548</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, ‘Postcolonialism and “The Figure of the Jew”’: Caryl Phillips and Zadie Smith in *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. James Acheson *et al.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p.110

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