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Globalism, Multiculturalism and Violence in Zia Hader Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* (2014) and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017)

Arin Keeble  and James Annesley

In Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), published during the early years of the War on Terror, one character describes the acceleration of globalisation: '[e]verywhere was now a part of everywhere else [...] Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discreet. This unsettled people. There were collisions and explosions'.¹ In subsequent years such explosions, in the form of violent terrorist attacks perpetrated by white nationalist, Christian fundamentalist, Jihadi and other ideologically driven extremist groups aggrieved by various aspects of these 'flows' and intersections, have proliferated. The visibility and spectacle of the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005, Oslo/Utoya Island in 2011, Manchester in 2018, El Paso in 2019, and the multiple attacks in Paris over the last decade, has not meant that such incidents are any more regular than those perpetrated by, for example, ETA, the IRA or the Baader-Meinhof group in the late twentieth century. They are, however, differentiated by their association with globalisation, multiculturalism and, more recently, the global migrant crisis. Though the connection is often tenuous, it retains currency in electoral politics, and particularly in the current post-2016 culture wars.

Despite these concerns, the rhetoric of positive multiculturalism has persisted – if not strictly as a social ideal, then as a powerful expression of the benefits of capitalist democracy and globalisation. Consider, for example, the London Olympics of 2012, built around then Mayor Ken Livingstone's strapline 'the world in one city'.² Despite the conspicuous and well-documented post-7/7 rise in Islamophobia and former Prime Minister David Cameron's indictments of 'state multiculturalism' in 2011, in a speech where, as Paul Gilroy has noted, Cameron 'instrumentalised the theme of failed, corrupting plurality', every aspect of the London Olympics, from Danny Boyle's opening ceremony to the promotion of key athletes, celebrated Britain's national identity as multicultural.³ This said, the London 2012 branding also, at least partially aligned with Cameron's rhetoric which, shortly after the Olympics in October of 2012, would cohere around the idea of an 'aspiration nation'.

The London 2012 brand, and numerous other such articulations of multiculturalism, relied fundamentally on notions of relative equality of opportunity and meritocracy (the latter, of course, particularly resonant in the context of elite sport). Such notions are implausible. As Jo Littler has noted, meritocracy

has been actively used to marketise the idea of equality despite the ways it functions ‘as a mechanism to both perpetuate, and create, social and cultural inequality’.⁴ In Littler’s terms, the rhetoric of multiculturalism persists alongside the continued, post-financial crisis rise of neoliberalism, despite the conspicuous closing and tightening of national borders and increasingly uneven distribution of wealth. Indeed, neoliberalisation has often been enabled by the aspirational myths of meritocracy and ‘global connectivity’ that accompany (and sometimes rely on) the rhetoric of multiculturalism. As Jodi Melamed has shown, neoliberal notions of ‘freedom’ have helped forge a contemporary era of ‘neoliberal multiculturalism’, described as a ‘market ideology turned social philosophy’: ‘It portrays an ethic of multiculturalism to be the spirit of neoliberalism and, conversely, posits neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity’.⁵

That said, the ideals of a generative plurality, global human solidarity and cultural exchange should obviously not be discarded and we want to be unambiguous about our position here. We embrace Gilroy’s enduring belief in ‘tolerance, peace, and mutual regard’ and Bhikku Parekh’s argument for multiculturalism as a civilised dialogue where ‘[n]o culture is self-authenticating and above criticism’.⁶ However, the inequalities that characterise contemporary multicultural societies are often elided in the public discourses of multiculturalism. Zadie Smith’s short story ‘The Embassy of Cambodia’, which is in many ways a challenge to the presentation and rhetoric of the 2012 Olympics, addresses such elisions, pointing to the facts of modern-day slavery and racialised poverty as systemic features of ‘global London’. Told partially by a ‘fourth person’ narrator and structured by twenty-one chapters that appear as badminton scores (0-1 through 0-21), we are introduced to Fatou, an Ivorian migrant who is an unpaid live-in domestic worker for the Derawal family in Northwest London. Fatou is watched by the unnamed narrator (who begins as ‘we the people of Willesden’) as she walks past the titular embassy, where a shuttlecock is perennially flying back and forth beyond its high walls. In some ways this badminton game is a backdrop for the story that evokes the banal rhythms of the neighbourhood via the recurring ‘Pock, smash. Pock, smash’.⁷ The story concludes, though, by inviting a different interpretation: ‘Pock, smash. Pock, smash. As if one player could imagine only a violent conclusion and the other only a hopeful return’.⁸ Such contradictions permeate the story’s vision of multicultural London in the aftermath of the Olympics. Its population is richly diverse – in the few short pages we are introduced to people from all over the world – and it is alarmingly uneven. Fatou ponders ‘whether she is a slave’ after reading about a Ghanaian slave in London in a discarded copy of *Metro*.⁹ Though she concludes that she is not, by the measures used by the Global Slavery Index, such as ‘entrapment’, she clearly is.¹⁰ Her only pleasure comes from occasional visits with her Nigerian friend Andrew (who has potentially sinister expectations of their relationship), and trips to the local leisure centre, which she can access only through a stolen guest pass. Fretting about being caught

or losing the pass, Fatou evokes the precarious positions of so many visitors and temporary residents, documented and undocumented, in London. While the short story invites us to consider the invisible inequalities and often bleak realities of the multicultural metropolis, longer novels are more typically identified as particularly suited to addressing the complexities of globalisation and to showing ways forward for global society. Smith's first novel, *White Teeth* (2000), published twelve years before 'The Embassy of Cambodia', for example, ultimately celebrates the potential of British multiculturalism to move beyond colonial and imperial legacies, in Irie's vision of a time where 'roots won't matter anymore'.¹¹

The idea that the novel can help orient us toward a better globalised society is prevalent in scholarship on contemporary fiction, too. Kristian Shaw argues that a selection of novels 'forge a future-oriented dialogue between local experiences and global flows, and imagine new modes of belonging sensitive to the cross-cultural interdependencies of world society'.¹² In the specific context of the continued rhetorical power of 'clash of civilizations' discourse after 9/11, Daniel O'Gorman notes that '[g]lobally oriented contemporary novels [...] have countered this official response, repeatedly attempting to bear witness to the complexities of post-9/11 global identity [...] contributing toward a reshaping of hegemonic discourse in more nuanced, ethical, and inclusive ways'.¹³ Shaw and O'Gorman are, of course, at least partly referring to the ways fiction can illuminate prejudice, inequality and suffering through human stories in order to argue for or show the way to global, human solidarity. Ultimately, though, their optimism about global novels, or fiction of the modern capitalist world-system, relies at least on the implicit suggestions of hope in such texts.

This essay examines two contemporary novels, Zia Hader Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* (2014) and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017), that are more pessimistic in their depictions of globalism and multiculturalism in Western, capitalist democracies in the early twenty-first century. Like Smith's 'The Embassy of Cambodia' they offer some hope in the way they expose the myths of multiculturalism; but Rahman's and Shamsie's pessimism extends to the potential of their own critiques. To be clear, we are not positioning these novels in alignment with the many critics of multiculturalism that seek to promote a normative Britishness or Americanness or the kinds of racialised nationalism that has re-emerged with alarming strength since 2016. Rather, this essay argues that their forceful pessimism, and the links they depict between globalism, multiculturalism and terrorism and violence, generate important understandings of the hidden realities of multiculturalism and globalisation, and of the novel's inability to represent the contemporary. Arguing that both novels confront the realities of, if not a failing multiculturalism, then one that is hamstrung by structural inequality, this essay reads these texts as interrogations of the neoliberal rhetoric of meritocracy, the unbending violence of the British class system, and the unevenness of globalism and the contemporary world-system. These novels aim their critiques at

precisely the antagonists that Gilroy identifies in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2006), when he was addressing earlier War on Terror-era attacks on multiculturalism: ‘institutional indifference and political resentment’ that has been fed by ‘the destruction of welfare states and the evacuation of public good, by privatization and marketisation’.¹⁴ In *In the Light of What We Know* and *Home Fire* multiculturalism is violently and explosively short-circuited by precisely such practices. Consequently, we read them as novels that sternly refute the ‘political mantra that “globalisation” is a tide lifting all boats’.¹⁵

Core to these ambitions are the moments of shocking violence that form key narrative elements in both novels. Rather than exploring the way a moment of traumatic terrorist violence puts pressure on an otherwise stable multiculturalism – a common conceit in 9/11 novels such as Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Joseph O’Neil’s *Netherland* (2008) and Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011) – Shamsie’s and Rahman’s novels are more interested in the ongoing and structural tensions that lead to violence and extremism. To a significant extent, they dramatise some of the ways that contemporary world-systems of core-semiperiphery-periphery ‘operate on multiple scales, rather than strictly national spheres’, including ‘household, city, region, nation or macro-area’.¹⁶ However, despite this emphasis on structural inequality and a movement away from paradigmatic, ‘event-based’ narratives of terrorism, and notwithstanding the specific formal devices that aid this departure, they still rely on many of the tropes that have been deployed in the ‘9/11 novel’ genre.¹⁷ They are both very much domestic narratives of family and relationships at the same time as they are conspicuously metafictional in ways that parallel the approaches used in *Netherland*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Submission*.¹⁸ That said, Rahman’s and Shamsie’s visions are gloomier in tone and their reliance on generic parallels with 9/11 novels serve more to highlight differences than speak to similarity. Moreover, where 9/11 metafiction registered an awareness of its own attempt to memorialise or represent trauma, the metafictional gestures of *Home Fire* and *In the Light of What We Know* extend their diegetic pessimism to their own potential for influence or impact, an approach that, this essay argues, sees them articulate a pessimism that is ultimately located in a shared vision of the violence of contemporary neoliberal world-systems. In the process, both *In the Light of What We Know* and *Home Fire*, move away from ‘event-based’ narratives, at least in the sense that spectacular or explosive moments and revelations arrive at the very end of the narratives. As a result, the events they describe are decentred in terms that allow their narratives to focus on the slow violence of world-systems. This is important because, as Bart Schuurman notes in *Critical Studies in Terrorism*, event-driven narratives have ‘served to prioritize particular subjects [...] while others, such as state-terrorism or right-wing extremist violence, are by this same logic left un- or under-examined’.¹⁹ In addition, this move away from event-based paradigms, sees both novels reliant on similar global triangulations. *Home Fire* moves between London, Amhurst and Raqqa (and has shorter but significant episodes in Istanbul and Karachi), while *In the Light of What We Know* moves between London, New York and Kabul (with

important episodes in rural Bangladesh and Dubai). However, and despite using structures that mirror the architecture of world-systems, they still remain domestic dramas that hinge on intimate relationships, particularly those focused on betrayal; relationships that allegorise intercultural and inter-class connections. Both novels also employ structuring literary conceits. *Home Fire* uses the narrative framework of *Antigone* while *In the Light of What we Know* is organised around a substantial weight of literary allusions and both use them to articulate a sense of frustration and despair about the limits of knowledge and representation. Though similar in terms of setting and with clear parallels between the stories told, the two novels are narrated in terms that make for a striking contrast. Where *Home Fire* is taut and suspenseful, *In the Light of What We Know* is, stately and circular, deploying extensive literary, mathematic and scientific digressions. The result is a pair of texts that create many productive points of comparison, at the same time as their very different approaches throw the wider debates into relief in terms that further understandings of both the limits and failures of globalism.

In the Light of What We Know

Structured in terms that typify the novel of globalisation, Zia Haidar Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know*, has the density and 'tentacular' ambition of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) or more recently, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013).²⁰ This said, its narrator's work in the ruthless global financial sector, and its emphases on extraterritoriality and global conflict build an image of 'globalization as the long historical project of national institutions and elites'.²¹ Moving in slow circles that recall Marlowe's tale telling, the novel's central protagonist, Zafar, tells stories from his life to the narrator, a nameless friend, a man who is part amanuensis and part interlocuter, an individual who frames the story even as he is implicated in its unfolding. Friends from Oxford, the pair share a great deal despite the striking differences in their class backgrounds and origins. Born in Bangladesh and brought up in poverty in Brixton, Zafar is a brilliant individual whose analytical mind takes him from a humble beginning to Harvard, Wall Street and London's Inns of Court. The narrator, in contrast, is the privileged scion of 'a well-known landed family in Pakistan' and a member of 'elite internationalist circles'.²² Brought up in the US when his father was working at Princeton, his Eton education and 'privileged background' contrasts sharply with Zafar's, a man for whom, as the narrator notes, 'Oxford must have seemed [...] a long way to come' (3). Paired by religion and linked through Pakistan's complex relationship with Bangladesh, the two figures divide sharply along class lines, a division that drives the story forward from the moment Zafar steps through the door of the narrator's town house in Kensington and starts to tell tales about Oxford, New York, Dubai, Kabul and Bangladesh. These stories have much to say about the fallacies of 'meritocracy' and unevenness of the modern capitalist world-system.

Linking the war in Afghanistan with cross collateralisation, and picturing the opulence of the English upper classes through the eyes of a man born into poverty in East Pakistan, *In the Light of What We Know* has a dense philosophical feel, its patterns inlaid with digressions into mathematics, psychology, carpentry and, in terms that echo the mesmerising cadence of Zafar's stories, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798). Tracing intricate connections as it goes, the result is a novel that presents a vision of the world that is nuanced, tangled and sophisticated. Eschewing easy trajectories, it gestures towards the links that unite colonialism and English public schools to money and war and in its portrait of love, friendship, betrayal and, ultimately, atrocity played out between bankers, lawyers, NGOs, private security contractors, the Pakistani ISI and the Taliban. In the process, it creates a vision of the contemporary that is defined by complexity and uncertainty, an emphasis that is made explicit in the flow of reflections on Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem that pattern the narrative and, more obliquely, in the title of the novel itself, a title that points to a process of constant revision and contingency. New insights emerge, layers are peeled away and new understandings come to light.

Working self-consciously with images of light and dark, images that call upon the language of colonialism, the novel qualifies its illuminations with the sense that every revelation moves our assumptions, changes the landscapes and asks us to redraw our maps. Indeed, in reading the novel, it is striking how frequently Rahman links light with comprehension. In the penultimate chapter, for example, Zafar looks for 'something that might shed the smallest light on what had happened?' (531). Earlier, we learn that as a boy, Zafar 'was intrigued to read about the properties of light' and as we follow the novel, both he and the narrator spend a lot of time trying to probe the mysteries of the opaque and untrustworthy Emily Hampton-Wyvern, as both, for their own reasons, search for ways of 'throwing a new light on her' (326; 240). A meditation on Poggendorff's Illusion and the inclusion of a conversation between the narrator and his father that includes the observation that 'metaphors have their place, but never as explanations, never as substitute for the thing itself, which is the only thing that can turn the lights on or leave us in the dark' foreground the novel's interrogation of enlightenment, even at the same time as they reinforces a sense of contingency (205; 139). The result is a novel that sees Zafar and the narrator more as adversaries than friends, playing games characterised by feints and misdirection, revealing and obscuring as they make their moves.

Explicit in its title, the importance of these layers of qualification and reframing also emerge from the text's steady patterning of meditations on the subjectivity and incompleteness of all of our understandings. In one typical episode, the novel has Zafar explain to the narrator:

You know Richard Feynman likened research physics to watching a curious game unfold on an eight-by-eight board of alternating

black and white squares, trying to figure out its rules – but watching it, he explained under odd constraints so that you could review only one corner of the board, and there notice things and try to work out the rules behind them [...] and so it goes on, this scratching away at the corner, unearthing rule after rule, trying to discern the patterns and rules of the game. (404)

Point of view and perspective, the way evolving insight rewrites understanding, is the focus here, one mirrored by the novel's reflections on the contrast between the Mercator Projection of the globe and the alternative proposed by Peters (22–24) just as it is in the persistent emphasis on Gödel's theorem. As the narrator notes, when reflecting on the projections, '(e)very time we want to understand anything, we have to simplify and reduce and, importantly, give up the prospect of understanding it all, in order to clear the way to understanding something at all. This, I think, is true of all human inquiry' (25).

What makes these moments interesting is that they raise questions that do more than articulate a generalised sense of doubt. Instead, they turn that doubt towards helping us see the complexities and inadequacy of the understandings of the world-systems in which we live, at the same time as they also make us sceptical about a novel's (this novel or, indeed, any novel) ability to represent it properly. With its explicit allusions to the unreliability that characterises both tale and the teller in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (1951), Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* (1944), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), *In the Light of What We Know*, foregrounds both its own unreliability at the same time as it articulates a deep-rooted scepticism about authoritative perspectives. More than that, it remains doubtful about the value of the novel itself, sentiments that emerge most clearly in 'Henna Tattoo, or Redundant and/or Superfluous', a chapter in which the narrator exhorts Zafar to 'write a book' (307), a proposal he responds to with a series of elegant manoeuvres that both block the narrator and serve as a wider interrogation on the novel's limits (307). Sarcastically rejecting the suggestion that he convert his own experiences into fiction, Zafar observes, '(w)hat the world needs now is answers to all its questions about Bangladeshi history. And it especially needs to hear those answers from me, an alien in his native land and interloper among his hosts, because I know so much about Bangladesh, I'm a bloody authority, that's what I am, a leading international luminary on the history of Bangladesh' (310). Wary of being drawn towards the 'postcolonial exotic', and doubtful of the value of a 'thick book with a lovely cover, a silhouette of a minaret and dome, a view of hills [...] Very nice' (311), Zafar dismisses the suggestion and dismisses *In the Light of What We Know* in the process.²³

More than just making it very clear that he is not a 'luminary', these passages also serve to remind the reader, just as Emily explained to Zafar, that we too should not be guilty of 'expecting too much from writing' (312). Fortright

and ultimately contemptuous, for Zafar: '[p]utting things on paper makes things real, hardens them, makes them unchangeable, even before things have made sense. Since when did books ever solve anything? They only raise more questions than they answer, otherwise they're just fucking entertainment. And I'm not here to fucking entertain you' (322). In all of his thinking, though, there is more than just a philosophical doubt about the meaning and value of fiction. These aren't abstract questions about how the world might be represented in a formal sense, these are doubts with significant social and political ramifications for Zafar too:

You know V.S. Naipaul's famous advice to the young Paul Theroux? *You have to tell the truth*. We think we know what he means and in fact we probably do, but only because we know vaguely what Naipaul must vaguely think. He's saying more than merely that a novel is an experiment in life which is what George Eliot said; after all other than metaphorically it isn't that at all. A metaphor is only useful for transforming what happens, *enriching* it in some way. It *never* tells you what actually happened, how it happened or why it happened. [...] If metaphors increase our understanding, they do so because they take us back to a familiar vantage, which is to say a metaphor cannot bring anything nearer. Everything now is on the rim of our view, in the darkness below the horizon, so that nothing new is visible in the light of what we know. (319-320)²⁴

Made explicit in the reference to Naipaul, Zafar's sense of the ways in which what is known always depends on what is unknown and unseen, beneath 'the rim of our view', becomes increasingly relevant in the novel's focus on the geopolitics that shaped Donald Rumsfeld's famous philosophising on 'known knowns, known unknowns and unknown unknowns', distinctions that Zafar finds, perhaps unsurprisingly, not risible, but 'insightful and useful' (430).²⁵ That the imagery Zafar employs, one of a globe turning to reveal new horizons emerging along its rim, as the planet spins and the sun tracks across its surface, bringing light to one hemisphere as it simultaneously brings darkness to the other, speaks so directly to an image of the globe, and in turn globalisation, as one that is necessarily mutable and contingent and in the process, draws his sense of the limitations of fiction alongside a wider critique of the narratives of globalisation. By foregrounding the prevalence of 'unknown unknowns' the novel not only asks us to be cautious about expecting 'too much from writing', but to be cautious too about setting too much store in the explanatory power of the globalisation debate. Important for the novel as a whole, these concerns come to the fore most explicitly in Zafar's account of his dealings with Colonel Sikander Ali Mushtaq, a spymaster for Pakistan's Inter-Services Agency (ISI).

In an episode reminiscent of a scene from a John le Carré novel, Zafar finds himself sat next to Mushtaq's son on a PIA flight from Dubai to Islamabad (a

seating arrangement too convenient to be coincidental) and is subsequently invited to Mushtaq's home. There, over games of chess, Mushtaq recruits Zafar to help the ISI's intelligence gathering efforts in Afghanistan, asking him to pay particular attention to Crane Morton Forrester, a former marine now employed as a private military contractor for 'Blackstar' (401). That Crane is an acquaintance of the narrator from 'the same summer camp in Vermont' (104), his time at Princeton and the son of the man who helped him secure a 'triple-A investment grade credit rating' (372) for his collateralised debt obligations (CDOs), only serves to make the scenes with Mushtaq both more forensic and precise, even as they create additional intricacy to the story. In a move that links a contemporary version of the Nineteenth-Century's Great Game to the world of overly engineered financial instruments, Rahman brings both the clarity of bright light and the obscuring shadow of complexity to his account of Zafar's experiences in Afghanistan.²⁶ In Kabul, Zafar finds himself stretched between Mushtaq's string pulling and the manipulations of Emily, his former lover and herself a spy. As he observes,

[t]his part of the world was just another chessboard, as I would be just another piece, but that is the way of this story, from one dark stretch road onto another. Kabul, a city of war had had its part of British blood and more. (35)

In these terms, Zafar is a player in a new version of the Great Game being played, not as it was in the past (between Britain and Russia over the future of Afghanistan), but on a board made dazzlingly complicated by globalisation and the simultaneous mesh and clash of national interests, finance, religion and power, a point he makes explicit when he qualifies his earlier metaphor and notes:

Afghanistan too had become a game, but it wasn't chess, not as we know it, not even the game of chess that is played in Asia with its difference that confound you [...] and its similarities that deceive you, but an altogether different game in which the players fight to set down the very rules. (404)

For Zafar, it is 9/11 that brings these forces into focus:

[b]ut then the planes brought down the towers and everything was fucked up, clocks unsprung and compass needles sent flying and who knew when or where they were. [...] The whole thing is irrational of course, the response to the attacks, the individual human responses and the collective political responses. (476)

Contextualising the chaos and making everything unknowable, is however, not just an attempt on Zafar's part to interrogate the ambitions of the novel, it is also like so many of the stories he tells, another feint. The games played

out between Crane, Emily, Mushtaq and the Taliban spy Suleiman have deadly consequences and Zafar is, of course, complicit in the events that lead up to Crane's death in the IED explosion at Kabul's Café Europa. Inevitably, then, many of his observations serve as attempts to try to distance himself from the deadly subterfuge and his own complicity. More tellingly, these stories and his focus on their incompleteness, work as a way of obscuring his act of personal violence, the rape of Emily that follows the death of Crane.

Eliding the act itself, drawing our eye past it, even as he makes excuses by linking his 'arousal' (534) to the carnage he has witnessed, and the 'primitive' (534) urges the scene of violence has provoked within him, Zafar pulls focus with a further meditation on ways of seeing and asks '(w)hat does an optical illusion tell you? It tells you that you have no direct access to reality' (535). To skip over the rape and suggest that it might be explained away by reflecting on point view is of course an egregious sleight of hand, one designed to shield himself from the 'reality' of Emily's experience, even as he admits his crime. Explicable in his own mind as the product of chaos in Kabul at the same time as he implies it might simply be a matter of perspective, an 'optical illusion', for the reader Zafar's defence is indefensible.

In raping Emily he finds himself replaying the moment of his own conception, and this fact sharpens scepticism about his attempts at misdirection. As the narrator has explained much earlier in the novel, 'his true father was a Pakistani soldier who raped his mother, and that his mother, his true mother, was the younger sister of the man who raised him as his own son' (137). In its final act then, the novel thus loops back from Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 to Bangladesh's violent origins and the brutality of West Pakistan's Operation Searchlight in 1971, an episode for the which the narrator's father, himself an émigré critic of Pakistan's actions at the time, provides the context: 'for Bangladesh with three million dead, hundreds of thousands of women raped and an entire generation of professionals, its engineers. Its doctors, its thinkers and doers exterminated, that poor country was hobbling on its infant feet' (219). Taking Zafar right back to this moment, even as he tries to excuse his actions and shield himself from seeing its 'reality', the novel thus offers a powerful image of a man trapped in his past, 'an exile, a refugee, if not from war, then of war, but also an exile from blood' (51). With the rapacious violence of one man mirrored in the actions of his son, history repeats itself.

What makes this episode more complex still is the fact that it is being related by Zafar to a man who has his own tangled relationship with Emily Hampton-Wyvern. Knowing that Emily had slept with him while Zafar was being treated in a private psychiatric hospital (at Emily's family's expense), the narrator is constantly forced to deflect Zafar's inquisition to protect himself from scrutiny. Emily's subsequent pregnancy and her decision to terminate deepens the intrigue and makes the slow unravelling of the intricacies of the relationships that connect Zafar, Emily and the narrator together more powerful still.

Zafar's belated realisation not just that he could not be the father (as Emily had told him he was), but that the narrator was, only serves to sharpen the relationship between tale and teller. In these terms, the novel offers a kind of domestic version of a chess game between two men over the inscrutable, duplicitous and, to them, impossibly exotic Emily Hampton-Wyvern, a small-scale Great Game. Energised by a form of Occidentalism that inverts and replaces Orientalism, it pitches two men, one from Bangladesh, another of Pakistani origin, into a rhetorical battle with each other, parrying and thrusting over a mysterious other, personified in an inscrutable upper-class English woman, a woman so duplicitous that her father tells Zafar, on hearing of their engagement, that he does not 'trust her one bit. I don't trust my own daughter' (504).

In these moves then, the novel sheds light on both its own formal and representational inadequacies even as it illuminates a world that it sees as being too complex to be properly illuminated. All understandings of the contemporary are incomplete, none more so than those offered *In the Light of What We Know*, a novel that offers a bleak vision of the world-system and a bleaker account of its own ability to understand, chart and critique that system. A passage (inaccurately) attributed to Winston Churchill in Zafar's notebook provides a telling peroration:

[t]he animal's hubris now persists in his idea that the truth beneath what he perceives, from the cosmic out there and forever to the mundane here and now, and even the man-made, that such ever-present truth as he believes there could be will not exceed his capacity to understand. (150-151)

For Rahman, everything is contingent. Where Shamsie seeks the clarity of dramatic and stark plotting Rahman becomes opaque. It is not a mirror, but nor is it a lamp. The novel does not really cast much light, instead it just sends out a faint glow that reflects back some hazy impressions of a world whose shapes are too intricate for us to understand. In the process, he brings alive the failures of globalisation in the age of multiculturalism and offers a bleak view of the contemporary, one limited by the light of all that we know, and equally constrained by everything we don't.

In both its formal design and its deliberate ratiocination, *In the Light of What We Know* has a texture that is very different than that of *Home Fire*. Shamsie's novel is urgent and tight, structured around five long sections and the perspectives of five characters that set up a series of binary relationships representing different life choices, trajectories and values, with a plot that turns on a series of melodramatic episodes. *In the Light of What We Know* in contrast, is circular, meditative and ambiguous. Interestingly, however, despite these differences, like *Home Fire*, Rahman's novel also relies on a series of pairings. The most obvious lies in the narrator's relationship with Zafar, a pairing that gives the novel a wilfully doubled (and duplicitous) structure. However, it is

also heavily reliant on the opposition between East and West and focuses on the boundaries that separate the English upper classes, patterns that mirror the kind of pairings seen in Shamsie's image of the twins, Parvaiz and Aneeka, the fathers Adil Pasha and Karamat Lone, or the union between Lone and his genteel East coast wife.

Home Fire

Just as Rahman's novel repeatedly refers to its own project as a 'story of the breaking of nations, war in the twenty-first century, marriage into the English aristocracy, and the mathematics of love' with 'one foot in the East and the other in the West' (diegetically, via the slowly unfolding central conversation), and just as it is always attuned to its own limitations as a 'representation', *Home Fire* is similarly reflexive (2; 311). When we are first introduced to Isma, the eldest of the three Pasha siblings (Aneeka and Parvaiz are much younger), she is entering airport security where, inevitably, she is profiled and interrogated for hours about her 'Britishness'. Isma provides a series of rehearsed responses that open up some of the political questions the novel explores. For example, launching the novel's sustained critique of the hypocrisies and double standards that characterise Britain's foreign policies and attitudes toward Muslim citizens, she points out that '[k]illing civilians is sinful – that's equally true if the manner of killing is a suicide vest or aerial bombardments or drone strikes' (5). Soon after this, we learn that Isma is writing about this particular social and political landscape, and it is hard not to make connections between her project and the novel's. Having left the family home in London, where she had raised her younger siblings, to continue the doctoral studies that were interrupted by the death of her mother when the twins were children, Isma is researching the 'sociological impact of the War on Terror' (39). We learn that she is co-authoring a research paper called 'Insecurity State: Britain and the Instrumentalisation of Fear' with her doctoral supervisor, too (39). Though the power of fiction is of course, to 'go beyond the narrowly political', Isma's subject is Shamsie's subject.²⁷ This metafictional impulse, as in *In the Light of What We Know*, means that the novel implicates itself in its own pessimism. Not only does it dramatisise the unevenness and cracks in British multicultural society, which lead in both cases to violence, it extends that sense of futility to the potential for literary or academic 'representations' to inspire or effect change.

This reflexivity girds a depiction of British multiculturalism where the benefits of plurality are qualified by a perennial, and often stark, inequality. Many isolated scenes in the novel include visions of diversity that emphasise vibrancy and cultural exchange in ways that resonate with the 'world in one city' rhetoric. For instance, in the grocers where Parvaiz works, the diversity of patrons and products is emphasised: 'Pakistanis, West Indians, Albanians – they were all fine by Nat. His shelves bursting with freshness and colour, the promise of family meals and welcoming neighbours' (140). Similarly, the

siblings' Aunt Naseem notes that where her generation of Muslim women were divided by those who were veiled and those who wore make up, '[n]ow everyone is everything at the same time' (64). The novel's extensive cast of minor characters embellish this too, and Claire Chambers points to the Iranian neighbour, Scottish political assistant, and Latin American bodyguard in her reading of the novel's depiction of a 'convivial diversity'.²⁸ Again, this is the multicultural London depicted in the 2012 Olympic branding. Other moments point to the realities that underpin this positive image of diversity and multiculturalism. For instance, Eamonn's friends perform a series of microaggressions in discussing his suspicious or 'rapidly altered behaviour', which they jokingly relate to his 'Muslim background' (82). Or, more pointedly, the spelling of his name, which as Isma (and later Aneeka) notes is 'an Irish spelling to disguise a Muslim name – Ayman became Eamonn so that people would know the father had integrated' (15-16; 64). However, it is the characterisation of Eamonn's father, the Home Secretary, Karamat Lone, that most vividly and explicitly depicts this qualified multiculturalism.

Lone is an archetypal, aspirational Tory, whose strident, Thatcherite individualism has crystallised in the neoliberal, multicultural present. He is a voice of assimilation, modernisation, meritocracy, and individual responsibility who has been embraced by the Conservative party and abandoned by the Muslim community from which he emerged. As one newspaper hatchet job has it, he 'used his identity as a Muslim to win, then jettisoned it when it started to damage him' (247). Crucially, he repeatedly argues that Britain celebrates and embraces all of its citizens as long as they conform to certain expectations and codes of Britishness. In a rousing speech to schoolchildren in Bradford at a 'predominantly Muslim School which counted among its alumni Karamat Lone himself and two twenty-year olds who had been killed by American airstrikes in Syria earlier in the year', he states: 'There is nothing this country won't allow you to achieve – Olympic medals, captaincy of the cricket team, pop stardom, reality TV crowns. And if none of that works out you can settle for being Home Secretary' (87). Lone's rhetoric of meritocracy in multicultural Britain, is quickly qualified, however. He goes on to note:

You are, we are, British. Britain accepts this. So do most of you. But for those of you who are in doubt about it, let me say this: don't set yourselves apart in the way you dress, the way you think, the outdated codes of behaviour you cling to, the ideologies to which you attach your loyalties' (88).

Finally, Lone concludes his mandate to conform with an alarming oxymoron. He warns that if they insist on their 'difference from everybody else', then they will miss out on all that is on offer in this 'multiethnic, multi-religious, multitudinous United Kingdom of ours' (88). For Lone, the UK's multiculturalism is to be celebrated, via the lens of aspiration, but contained and controlled – particularly in terms of how people think, what they believe and how they dress.

This depiction of Lone reveals the acumen and prescience of Shamsie's novel in two ways. Firstly, *Home Fire* famously 'predicted' the rise of Britain's first Muslim Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, who was appointed under Prime Minister, Theresa May in 2018. Like Lone, Javid was born in Northern England (Rochdale) to Pakistani migrants, and like Lone he was inspired by Thatcherite calls for individual responsibility. Javid's worldview is often expressed in terms of meritocracy. He is a vocal champion of neoliberal policies, has sat on free market think tanks such as The Institute of Economic Affairs and has been a regular participant at the American Enterprise Institute. Shamsie addressed this 'prediction' in a *Guardian* article in 2018, following Javid's appointment and after being referred to as 'NostraShamsie' on Twitter. She describes wanting to create a fictional Home Secretary who, like the Pasha siblings is a child of Pakistani Muslim migrants in the first instance. Following this impulse, she felt emboldened to go ahead with what she initially felt was implausible, by three emerging politicians who were children of 'Pakistani-British bus drivers: Sajid Javid, Sadiq Khan and Sayyeda Warsi'.²⁹ So while Lone is not based strictly on Javid, he was something of an inspiration. Secondly and more pertinently, one of Lone's key policies is to give the Home Secretary the power to rescind British citizenship. In *Home Fire*, Parvaiz's and (for all intents and purposes) Aneeka's citizenships are stripped in a context that is particularly potent in the light of the Shamima Begum case. Begum was a so-called 'IS bride' who left the UK for Syria 2014 as a fifteen-year-old child. Her citizenship was eventually revoked in February 2019 by Sajid Javid amidst a sustained attack on Begum from the conservative media. In both the novel, and in the Begum case, the Home Secretary refused to listen to the pleading of these citizens (and their families) who were labelled as 'enemies of Britain'.

Acts of listening and, indeed, not listening, provide another way of considering *Home Fire's* depiction of multiculturalism as something that is qualified and arbitrary. The significance of sound and listening in the novel, has been meticulously analyzed by Claire Chambers, whose discussion of these preoccupations begins by considering the novel's invitation to 'listen to – while simultaneously refusing to condone – jihadists'.³⁰ For Chambers, this is where the novel's power lies: in its willingness to listen to 'individuals who are usually unattended to: most notably, radicalized subjects'.³¹ It is undoubtedly the case that the novel is particularly attentive to the aural. Soundscapes are woven into the texture of the narrative and they are important to the diegetic action, too. Of particular importance are the home field recordings made by Parvaiz, part of the way the novel depicts him as a sensitive, creative and thoughtful young person. Parvaiz sits on the roof of the garden shed, which gives him a 'clear view of the trains pulling in and out of Preston Road' and 'snapshots of life passing by', and he records the sounds of his neighbourhood in Alperton for a project he has called *Preston Road Station Heard from the Garden Shed* (217). We learn that Parvaiz has spent two years recording a minute of random ambient sound from this space which he plans as a 1,440-minute audio track that: 'his ideal listener would play between midnight of

one day and the next – a soundscape of every minute of a day from this perch, recorded over 1,440 days’ (131). But Parvaiz’s recordings don’t ever find a listener, much less an ‘ideal listener’ and this has powerful metaphorical traction. Crucially, and as Chambers points out, neither does he:

Parvaiz is not listened to by his own sisters, and instead Farooq lends a sympathetic ear outside the family. More broadly, those seeking to return home from Islamic State are not given a second chance, nor are their families granted an empathetic hearing (217).

In *Home Fire*, the consequences of these acts of not listening are grave, and lead, as Chambers has noted to ‘fury’ and ‘violence’. We might also note, however, that there are moments where people are listened to and this is particularly clear in the first section oriented by Isma’s perspective. As Eamonn sits with Isma, who, initially balks at his gestures of friendship and is suspicious of him (knowing his father is the Conservative Home Secretary Lone), he listens attentively: ‘he was careful not to dominate the conversation – listening with interest’ (19). Later, as they share music with each other, he ‘listened, eyes closed’ to the track she shares (29). Eamonn listens to Isma and, of course later, to Aneeka. Even Lone gives Isma something of a hearing as the novel nears its tragic conclusion. This is not to challenge Chambers, so much as to point out that the novel’s tragic conclusion is a result of both acts of ‘not listening’ and a failure to listen thoroughly or respectfully. We might also note that *In the Light of What We Know* is structured around acts of listening, as much as it is around seeing and illumination: the unnamed frame narrator has listened to Zafar and his recordings of their conversations and remains no further forward in making sense of his violent story.

Our reading of *Home Fire* does not see quite as much hope as Chambers does. Though she is cautious about making claims for ‘literature’s prospect of saving the world’, she sees value in the unique power of literature – and *Home Fire* in this case – to enable ‘understanding’.³² We agree with this, too, in broad terms, but want to note that *Home Fire* is pessimistic about the unevenness of the multicultural present and its own potential to be heard. The ending of the novel sees Eamonn fly to Karachi to be with Aneeka who is camped out with the body of her assassinated twin in a park. As he approaches her, he is attacked and strapped with a suicide vest that ultimately kills them both. It is a powerful conclusion and if the novel enhances our understanding of the multicultural present through its vivid human stories, it urgently points to our failings. Crucially, as we have noted, the metafictional apparatus of the novel, means that its pessimism is extended to its own prospect of saving the world.

Finally, we must see *Home Fire*’s pessimistic vision of multicultural London as co-extensive with its depiction of globalism and the contemporary world-system. Just as it meticulously constructs a vision of ‘convivial’ multicultural

London only to tragically reveal its inequalities, it also defines its international perspective – London, Amherst, Raqqa, Istanbul and Karachi – through inequality; both in terms of the differential wealth of nations, and with regard to the freedoms to move freely from place to place. Indeed, in some compelling ways, the global structure of the novel, mirrors its vision of London – which has its own core-semiperiphery-periphery dynamics: the Kensington flat where Eamonn lives, or centres of political and financial power in which Karamat circulates represent the core, and the Preston Road area, the periphery. This narrative architecture dramatises the assertion made by Deckard and Shapiro that the world-system comprised of core-semiperiphery-periphery relations, ‘operate[s] on multiple scales, rather than strictly national spheres’, which might include ‘house-hold, city, region, nation or macro-area’.³³

The pessimism of *Home Fire* and *In the Light of What We Know* is firstly located in their shared critiques of the persistence of global neoliberalisation – particularly in relation to the ways neoliberalism has, as Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald-Smith noted, expanded ‘granularly into the sociocultural and ontological fabric of everyday life’ and in the hollow rhetoric of meritocracy that has facilitated this expansion.³⁴ These novels show how the discourse of positive multiculturalism and globalism has elided this phenomena. As we have noted, this is not to say that the novels explicitly or tacitly reinforce the kinds of nationalism that are worryingly popular now, nor do they posit any kinds of alternative formations. They do, however, show that the stark inequality that has been perpetuated by globalism and elided by some of the public discourses of multiculturalism needs more scrutiny. But, as we have shown, they also remain pessimistic about their own potential for impact or for any literary representation’s impact.

Notes

¹ Rushdie, *Shalimar The Clown*, 37.

² Livingstone, “One City Containing all the World.”

³ Gilroy, “My Britain is fuck all’,” 385.

⁴ Littler, “Meritocracy as Plutocracy,” 53.

⁵ Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 138.

⁶ Parekh, “Multiculturalism is a Civilized Dialogue.”

⁷ Smith, “The Embassy of Cambodia.”

⁸ Smith, “Embassy.”

⁹ Smith, “Embassy.”

¹⁰ Global Slavery Index, “Modern Slavery.”

¹¹ Smith, *White Teeth*, 527.

¹² Shaw, “Globalization,” 26.

¹³ O’Gorman, “Global Terror | Global Literature,” 457.

¹⁴ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 1.

¹⁵ Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 22.

¹⁶ Deckard and Shapiro, *World Literature, Neoliberalism and the Culture of Discontent*, 9.

¹⁷ Keeble, “The 9/11 Novel,” 273-285.

¹⁸ Keeble, “The 9/11 Novel,” 274.

¹⁹ Schuurman, “Topics in Terrorism Research,” 2.

²⁰ Annesley, “Market Corrections,” 112.

²¹ Hart, *Extraterritorial*, 10.

²² Rahman, *In the Light of What We Know*, 4.

²³ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 13.

²⁴ Referring to Theroux, *Sir Vidia’s Shadow*,

39: ‘The truth is messy. It is not pretty.

Writing must reflect that. Art must tell the truth’.

See also Eliot’s ‘Letter to Dr Joseph Frank Payne, 25th January 1876’, 216: ‘My

writing is simply a set of experiments in life -

an endeavour to see what our thought and

emotion may be capable of - what stores of

motive, actual or hinted as possible, give

promise of a better after which we may strive

to keep hold of as something more sure

than shifting theory’.

²⁵ Graham, “Rumsfeld’s Knowns and Unknowns.”

²⁶ Referring to the struggle between Russia and Britain played out in the mountains of central Asia, the term had currency in nineteenth-century writings, before being popularised in literature by Rudyard Kipling, particularly in *Kim* (1901). Cf. Kipling, *Kim*, 276/7: ‘Now I shall go far and far into the North, playing the Great Game. Truly it runs like a shuttle throughout all Hind’.

²⁷ Morley, “‘How Do We Write About This?’,” 720.

²⁸ Chambers, “Sound and Fury,” 208.

²⁹ Shamsie, “True Story.”

³⁰ Chambers, “Sound and Fury,” 202.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Chambers, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*, 201.

³³ Deckard and Shapiro, *World Literature, Neoliberalism and the Culture of Discontent*, 9.

³⁴ Huehls and Greenwald-Smith, “Introduction,” 3.

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