

Desiring Postcolonial Britain: Genre  
Fiction since *The Satanic Verses*

Sarah Post, BA (Hons), MA

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2012

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**Abstract**

This thesis argues that the disciplines of genre studies and postcolonial criticism can usefully be brought to bear upon one other in order to interrogate constructions of Britishness in contemporary fiction. I understand Britain as a postcolonial country and attempt to rectify the frequent sidelining of genre fiction from criticism of postcolonial literature by opening up discussion of a wider range of postcolonial authors and topics. Contrary to popular understandings of genre that tend to operate around rules and conventions, I define genres according to the sets of desires that they engage with, such as fear, lust or consumerism. The overarching questions that I ask of the texts and films regard the negotiation, repression and expression of desires related to hopes and fears about postcolonial Britain and variously expressed through the genres of Bildungsroman, Gothic, comedy, national romance and subcultural urban fiction. This thesis uniquely combines postcolonial theory, genre criticism, psychoanalytic and economic constructions of desire, and contemporary literature, in order to analyse contemporary constructions of Britishness.

Each chapter begins with analysis of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), the publication of which created a violent collision between ideas of Britishness, immigration, politics and fiction. By considering *The Satanic Verses* in relation to

genres in which it participates – allowing the text to speak as a work of fiction, rather than polemic tract appropriated to suit the agendas of rival ideologies – I shift the parameters of critique and breathe new life into debates surrounding the text. This has the added benefit of illustrating how even the most prestigious postcolonial novels participate in genres, and in doing so concurrently raises the profile of postcolonial genre studies.

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## Introduction

### Desiring Postcolonial Britain: Genre Fiction since *The Satanic Verses*

*'The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas so they dodo don't know what it means.'*<sup>1</sup>

This thesis argues that the disciplines of genre studies and postcolonial criticism can usefully be brought to bear upon one other in order to interrogate constructions of Britishness in contemporary fiction. I understand Britain as a postcolonial country and attempt to rectify the frequent sidelining of genre fiction from criticism of postcolonial literature by opening up discussion of a wider range of postcolonial authors and topics. Contrary to popular understandings of genre that tend to operate around rules and conventions, I define genres according to the sets of desires that they engage with, such as fear, lust or consumerism. The overarching questions that I ask of my selected texts regard the negotiation, repression and expression of desires related to hopes and fears about postcolonial Britain and variously expressed through the genres of Bildungsroman, Gothic, comedy, national romance and subcultural urban fiction. This thesis uniquely combines postcolonial theory, genre criticism, psychoanalytic and economic constructions of desire, and contemporary literature, in order to analyse contemporary constructions of Britishness. The remainder of this introduction outlines the key theoretical and conceptual paradigms that I bring to bear on my subsequent analysis of literature and film.

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 343.

## Narrating the Nation

This thesis works on the premise that in a culturally diverse country, Britain needs something that transcends material, ethnic, economic and religious disparities in order to create a sense of national identity: it requires new modes of narration. The links between nation and narration have been thoroughly interrogated, most notably by Benedict Anderson, who figures nations as ‘imagined political communit[ies]’ and by Homi Bhabha, who claims that ‘[n]ations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye.’<sup>2</sup> Bhabha expands on this, stating:

The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address.<sup>3</sup>

As such, peoples are fictional as well as factual entities, understood and understanding themselves variously through differing ideologies and frames of reference, rather than existing independently of forms of signification. Already, one notes implicit similarities between understandings of nation and storytelling; the nation is understood in terms of its constructed nature, its imaginative qualities and its mode of expression. It is important to note that narration is not the story but the way the story is told, and that there are important psychological and political implications to take into account when considering narration, so as to ensure that it is not conceived of as a neutral act. Peter Brooks states, ‘[w]e can [...] conceive of the reading of plot as a

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 4; Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Introduction: narrating the nation’, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1-7 (p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation’, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-322 (p. 297).

form of desire [...]. Narratives both tell of desire – typically present some story of desire – and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification.’<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Angela Carter highlights the political implications of narration, suggesting that ‘narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms.’<sup>5</sup> It now becomes more apparent why the way that nations are imagined and mediated through fiction is important for an understanding of Britishness. The way that the national story is told leaves room for argument or political agenda, coercion or persuasion, whilst comprising power imbalances regarding who has the knowledge and who is able to narrate the stories. This is where the boundaries between nation and nationalism begin to blur, as the ‘myth of nationhood, masked by ideology, perpetuates nationalism, in which specific identifiers are employed to create exclusive and homogenous conceptions of national traditions [...]. Constructions of the nation are thus potent sites of control and domination.’<sup>6</sup>

This project is timely in its analysis of ‘Britishness’ as the term seems to have become what Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin refer to as a ‘floating signifier’ – one that is swollen to include anything that interpreters might wish it to mean, which is especially unhelpful when used (as it frequently is) in contrast to Others that are narrowly defined to mean ‘all that is threatening and foreign.’<sup>7</sup> Seen in an alternative, and more liberating light, this also means that fiction can be a powerful tool for de- and re-narrating idea(l)s of Britishness. This will be the focus of my thesis, as I endeavour to

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Hegerfeldt, ‘The Stars that Spring from Bastardising: Wise Children Go For Shakespeare’, *Zeitschrift Für Englische Philologie*, 121 (2003), 351-72 (p. 371).

<sup>6</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 36.

locate the ways that contemporary authors – predominantly from ethnic minorities – have negotiated concepts of Britishness in their fiction.

### **Postcolonial Genres**

My thesis marks a critical break with what has gone before in my exclusive focus on genre fiction and the unique contribution it can make to the writing of nation. Though individual genres have been theorised in relation to postcolonial criticism, there has not, until now, been a critical intervention that considers precisely what it is about genre *itself* that makes it useful for a postcolonial project and for writing contemporary Britain.<sup>8</sup> My chapters are structured around different genres of literature and film and examine how various genres are exploited in order to articulate desires that feed into constructions of Britishness. Genre is a useful way of distinguishing between my selected texts, which ask different narrative questions of Britishness and revolve around differing negotiations of desire (a critical term that I will come to later).

Critiquing Benedict Anderson's work on imagined communities, Rick Altman argues that 'Anderson concentrates on the moment when a nation was formed and stops there, failing to acknowledge the ongoing nature of the process he has described.'<sup>9</sup> Extending Anderson's project, Altman goes on to outline parallels between nation and narration that are highlighted specifically through reference to genre:

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<sup>8</sup> For examples of critics that have discussed specific postcolonial genres, see Mark Stein on the Bildungsroman in *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004); Alison Rudd on the Gothic in *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010); Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein in their edited collection on comedy, *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 198.

Genres are not only formal arrangements of textual characteristics; they are also social devices that use semantics and syntax to assure simultaneous satisfaction on the part of multiple users with apparently contradictory purposes. That is, genres are regulatory schemes facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single unified social fabric. As such, genres operate like nations and other complex communities. Perhaps they can even teach us about nations.<sup>10</sup>

The continuing tension between diverse factions and unification – identified by Altman as a property of genre – requires a mobile, evolving means of description. Similarly dynamic and embodying tensions between diversity and unity are national agendas, rendering the two systems comparable and mutually informative. I take up Altman’s tentative challenge in this thesis in order to demonstrate what genre(s) *can* teach us about nations.

Moreover, Altman’s description of the link between generic boundaries and national communities highlights genre fiction’s potential for a postcolonial project, in which those ‘[s]atisfied with the current situation, users of generic and national terminology alike have a desire to slow the process of regenerification, while margin dwellers have every reason to speed it up.’<sup>11</sup> Notice the pun on gentrification, suggesting ‘regenerification’s’ participation in divisive discourses of conservation and change. I focus on ‘margin dwellers’ in both national and generic terms (examining Britishness and fictions respectively), arguing that the unstable boundaries of genre make useful sites for traditionally marginalised authors to make internal contradictions apparent and to begin to negotiate both national and generic boundaries.

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<sup>10</sup> Altman, p. 195.

<sup>11</sup> Altman, pp. 204-05.

Genre is also intrinsically tied to specific historical periods, as has been argued by a number of critics who have tried to release genre criticism from what Fredric Jameson describes as ‘semantic’ approaches: those that ‘aim to describe the essence or meaning of a given genre by way of the reconstruction of an imaginary entity [...] which is something like the generalized essential experience behind the individual texts.’<sup>12</sup> For Jameson, it is crucial that ‘the “essence”, “spirit”, “world-view”, in question is revealed to be an ideologeme, that is, a historically determinate conceptual or semic complex which can project itself variously in the form of a protonarrative, a private or collective narrative fantasy.’<sup>13</sup> Many of the texts that I analyse work at the borders of generic frameworks and in doing so have the capacity to question the world-views previously imagined by other participants of the genre. By situating works in the Gothic genre, for example, postcolonial authors are able to aesthetically exploit the style and conventions of Gothic, whilst also questioning the ‘essence’ of colonial Gothic in reference to structures of alterity. For the authors that I analyse, genre functions as an ‘enabling device,’ to borrow David Duff’s term.<sup>14</sup> Texts are not bound to endless lists of conventions and rules but rewrite genres from within. It shall become apparent that many of the postcolonial authors I have selected radically shift the parameters of the genres they participate in.

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<sup>12</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism’, in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. by David Duff (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 167-92 (p. 168). For further discussion on the inherent historicity of genres, see further Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 28-31 and Hans Robert Jauss, ‘Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature’, in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. by David Duff (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 127-47 (p. 141).

<sup>13</sup> Jameson, ‘Magical Narratives’, p. 175.

<sup>14</sup> David Duff, ‘Introduction’, in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. by David Duff (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 1-24 (p. 2).

This thesis also makes a critical intervention into the construction of genre and what the term itself constitutes. Moving away from a rather tired conceptualisation of genre, which in the footsteps of the likes of structuralist Vladimir Propp – who laboriously and minutely identified the formal properties of the fairy tale – still tends to have an investment in rules and formulae, I alternatively theorise genre in terms of desire.<sup>15</sup> This is a less rigid and more enabling structure than has previously been granted to the study of genres, as it reflects human psychologies rather than mechanical rules. I will further elaborate on my conceptualisation of desire later in this introduction, after clarifying what I mean by terming Britain ‘postcolonial.’

### **Postcolonial Britain**

Traditionally, postcolonial countries have been understood as those that were formerly colonised, rather than colonising. In their seminal work *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s introduction affirms that ‘[w]e use the term post-colonial [...] to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.’ They go on to list: ‘the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka.’<sup>16</sup> A startling omission from this apparently exhaustive list is Britain, as a culture that has also been ‘affected by the imperial process,’ though this omission can probably be put down to the binarising structure that the critics work around, in which ‘writing back’ suggests a distance from the former colonial centre.

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<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Propp, ‘Fairy Tale Transformations’, in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. by David Duff (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 50-67.

<sup>16</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Empire Writes Back*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 2.

I understand Britain as a postcolonial country because its peoples, legacies and national imaginings are shaped by its former colonial relationships. Moreover, I think that it is *important* to situate Britain as a postcolonial nation so as not to repress its shameful colonial history, and to acknowledge Britain's defining social legacy as a former world power. John McLeod explains the choice he similarly made when entitling his book *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*, acknowledging that 'the deployment of this term involves a degree of risk,' in terms of 'potentially deflect[ing] critical attention away from the economic, social and cultural circumstances in countries with a history of colonialism'; there is a 'danger of recentralizing the Western metropolis.'<sup>17</sup> He concludes that:

When proceeding with a perception of London in terms of the postcolonial we must be careful to note that its postcoloniality is not at all commensurate with sites of colonial settlement in once-colonized countries. But [...] it would also be inappropriate to consider London as solely the undifferentiated colonial 'centre' or immune from the consequences of Empire, its resistance and its decline.<sup>18</sup>

Like McLeod, I acknowledge that there are vital historical differences between Britain and the former colonies: emotional, physical and cultural traumas have been visited on what is now the Commonwealth and beyond by Britain and have disrupted physical, psychological and ideological landscapes accordingly. However, recognising Britain as a nation affected by its history of colonialism assures that the voices of peoples that have a history of being colonised are included within the national narrative, and that migrants to Britain from the former colonies can be acknowledged as postcolonial

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<sup>17</sup> John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> McLeod, p. 15.

peoples without being ‘othered’ through narratives that still rely upon historical binaries between colonial centre and margins.

James Procter highlights ways in which black authors have historically suffered from a ‘burden of representation,’ or ‘[t]he problem of trying to say everything about black Britishness [...] in which the narration of black Britain feels a problematic pressure to delegate, or “speak for” the whole of that imagined community.’<sup>19</sup> However, if we imagine Britain as postcolonial, the nation can be constructed around a shared history of colonial entanglement, and mediations of the nation must include acknowledgment of its historical legacies and its present peoples. As such, acknowledging a history can create an imaginative space for diasporic peoples whilst equally beginning to make sense of Britain’s ongoing neo-imperial involvements. The authors (of fiction and film) that I will consider are therefore not solely from migrant backgrounds. By implicating the British population in its entirety as a postcolonial nation the so-called ‘burden of representation’ does not rest exclusively on migrant communities.<sup>20</sup>

### **Devolved Identities**

However, a problem immediately arises in employing Britishness as an inclusive term denoting a shared history in colonialism, as it subsumes devolving internal identities (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish). Furthermore, the colonial history is not equally shared. Although what we commonly understand as Britain’s colonial history was mutually embarked upon, the imperial mission started from England, acquiring first Wales, and then Scotland and Northern Ireland, finally becoming the United

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<sup>19</sup> James Procter, ‘General Introduction’, in *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998*, ed. by James Procter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 1-12 (p. 7).

<sup>20</sup> In Chapter Three I analyse films by white British directors Chris Morris and Joe Cornish.

Kingdom as we know it following the ‘Act of Union’ that came into effect in 1801. In her autobiographical work, *Sugar and Slate*, Charlotte Williams, a Welsh-Guyanese author, parallels the English colonisation of the Welsh language and its resources to Britain’s colonisation and even enslavement of the rest of the empire. Williams’s discussion of quarry-workers and the quarry owner, Lord Penrhyn, employs imperial rhetoric, as she states that ‘[t]hey were the black slaves to his white supremacy, the real Welsh to his Anglo-Welshness.’<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Britishness itself is a loaded term and one that many may not (at least primarily) identify with.

Though ‘Britishness’ might be a useful term for a multicultural nation, it elides the differences between its constituent parts.<sup>22</sup> The question may be asked as to why I am considering Britishness at all in a time of what Lynne Pearce has termed ‘devolving identities.’<sup>23</sup> However, Pearce’s edited collection was compiled at a time of optimism, shortly following the official acts of devolution in 1997 and 1998. A decade and a half later, and initial doubts over ‘what a centre-led devolution policy can achieve’ are justified, whilst a fading of the initial revolutionary spirit is evident.<sup>24</sup> Pearce highlights the need for revolution within devolutionary politics:

Within the discourses of postcolonialism, indeed – and alongside the rhetorical celebration of ‘cultural *difference*’ – it suddenly becomes important that the erstwhile ‘margins’ of the UK, like Eire before them, should be allowed a

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<sup>21</sup> Charlotte Williams, *Sugar and Slate* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 2002), p. 175.

<sup>22</sup> With reference to the ‘Parekh Report’ of 2000, Anne-Marie Fortier argues that ‘[b]ecause of [the] association [of Englishness] with white supremacy, white privilege, imperialism, and its historical position at the centre of British political and cultural life, [the report] rejects Englishness as an appropriate label for the re-imagined multi-ethnic nation.’ Anne-Marie Fortier, *Multicultural Horizons: Diversity and the Limits of the Civil Nation* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Lynne Pearce (ed.), *Devolving Identities: Feminist Readings in Home and Belonging* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Lynne Pearce, ‘Introduction: Devolution and the Politics of Re/location’, in *Devolving Identities: Feminist Readings in Home and Belonging*, ed. by Lynne Pearce (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 1-36 (p. 14).

constitutional freedom, independence and autonomy that is *not still* yoked to ‘the centre’ as it is under the current model of devolution.<sup>25</sup>

However, this un-yoking from the centre has not, to date, been fully achieved, meaning that Britain is still a politically viable term, if only because it might be seen to encapsulate the tensions between localisms, regionalisms and nationalisms effectively. Whilst talking about Britishness as both an ideal and a site of conflicting ideologies, I will geographically locate the texts that I discuss, with reference to internal tensions and alternative strategies of identification. This also takes into consideration Procter’s sound observation that to perceive Britain as ‘a homogenous unified flatland’ is to suggest erroneously that ‘it is somehow the same to be black in London as it is in Llandudno.’<sup>26</sup>

### **New Racism and Muslim Identities**

The majority of the authors that I discuss are from a Muslim, and often South-Asian background.<sup>27</sup> The reason for this preference lies in my intention to interrogate ‘Britishness,’ which in blurring the lines between nation and nationalism has frequently expressed itself as an ideology that posits Muslim cultures and beliefs as its Other. By privileging those that are often on the receiving end of strategies of Othering, I am able to question the binaries created in national(ist) identifications. I share Kobena Mercer’s opinion that rather than being overly concerned with representation, ‘it always seems more important to know who or what you were

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<sup>25</sup> Pearce, ‘Introduction’, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> I use the term ‘Muslim’ broadly as does Amin Malak, to include ‘the person who believes firmly in the faith of Islam; and/or, via an inclusivist extension, by the person who voluntarily and knowingly refers to herself, for whatever motives, as a “Muslim” when given a selection of identitarian choices; and/or, by yet another generous extension, by the person who is rooted formatively, and emotionally in the culture and civilization of Islam.’ Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 7.

writing against.’<sup>28</sup> In the case of contemporary narratives of Britishness, the most important thing to ‘write against’ is an increasing level of Islamophobia manifesting itself in policing, racist attacks, and selectively distorting media coverage.

My focus on (critiques of) Islamophobia mirrors and countermands the shift that Procter identifies in racist discourse from ‘imperial’ racisms centred around “‘biological’ difference’ towards ‘new’ racisms that operate on the basis of cultural differences.”<sup>29</sup> The shift implied in ‘new’ racism has had profound political implications, engendering the necessity for a new parliamentary act to extend the protection against hate offences to religious as well as racial groups. Before the ‘Racial and Religious Hatred Act’ was passed in 2006, Chris Allen argues that the shift in discrimination ‘from race to religion’ opened up what he terms a ‘window of opportunity’ for far-right groups like the British National Party that had previously been ‘somewhat restricted by legislative protection,’ finding a group ‘with a clear and definable yet unprotected marker: Muslim identity.’<sup>30</sup> He goes on to argue that this racist opportunism came to a head in 2001, as ‘whilst the shift from race to religion

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<sup>28</sup> Kobena Mercer, ‘Back to My Routes: A Postscript to the 1980s (1990)’, in *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998*, ed. by James Procter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 285-93, (p. 287).

<sup>29</sup> Procter, *Dwelling Places*, p. 171.

<sup>30</sup> Chris Allen, ‘From Race to Religion: The New Face of Discrimination’, in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, ed. by Tahir Abbas (London: Zed Books, 2005), pp. 49-65 (p. 54). He outlines a particular bout of leafleting in Oldham: ‘In line with [the] closing distance between acceptable and unacceptable, the British National Party (BNP) sought justification of its views and societal legitimacy by producing a wide body of materials and resources that exploited the specifically post-9/11 fears and threats, however real or absurd. Much of this was highly inflammatory: it encouraged insult, provocation and abuse, and employed language and images calculated to initiate or encourage hatred. At the same time the BNP stressed the legality of its actions. [...] Muslims were clearly being singled out within the all encompassing “Asian”. Since 94 per cent of the Muslim community in Oldham are ethnically South Asian (ONS 2004), the legislation in place to protect such communities was rendered useless through the shift of markers towards Islam and Muslimness, leaving a large and distinct “racial group” vulnerable.’ (pp. 55-56)

clearly has its roots prior to 9/11, it was Ground Zero that provided the catalytic impetus to its quasi-justification.<sup>31</sup>

Yet whilst arguments like Allen's and Procter's are useful when considering the manifestations and assumptions of 'new' racism, there is still clearly a link between its historical and contemporary manifestations, with the body often operating as the contested site when it comes to signifying national identification and/or belonging. In Shamshad Khan's poem, 'Megalomaniac' (2007), the body as a marker of identity is apparent:

this season brown is the new black

this season

Asian Muslims replace African Caribbeans as the most oppressed

[...]

society's built like a big house of cards

new york city

two aces topple

and over here

the whole pack gets shuffled

some of us go out of fashion

this season we're not passive Asians

this season we're raving Muslims

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<sup>31</sup> Allen, p. 55.

potential terror threats  
 headquarters in the corner shop  
 [...]

we're all Black  
 brothers  
 when there's plenty

but when things are short  
 a Jew is a Jew  
 Black means African not Asian  
 and Asian doesn't mean Chinese

only so much room under an umbrella  
 when it's raining<sup>32</sup>

This poem is concerned with the irony of a way of identifying that has shifted from collective to conflicting. It notes that strategies of identification tend to be collective and unifying in times when minority solidarity against a white Other is politically expedient; however, as one particular cultural group accrues negative press, Khan highlights the tendency for identities to quickly devolve in order to disassociate from the 'offending' party, in this case, Muslims, or by wider implication (in this context), South Asians. 'Megalomaniac' maps a shift from an all-encompassing 'blackness' to a process of persecutory re-identification as Muslim, Asian and 'brown.'<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Shamshad Khan, 'Megalomaniac', in *Megalomaniac* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), pp. 67-105 (pp. 80-81).

<sup>33</sup> James Procter, 'Part Three: mid-1980s to late 1990s Introduction', in *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998*, ed. by James Procter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 193-96 (p. 194).

Further reasons for the disproportionate South Asian representation in this thesis will be revisited in my chapter on consumerism, situating desire in a capitalist-driven (publication) system (evoked in the diction ‘brown is the new black’). Locating the construction of identity amidst consumerist desires means that it can be seen as to some extent performative and consumable, with controversial topics driving market forces.

### **Postcolonial Desire**

As my title suggests, I will structure representations of Britishness through a set of desires that are worked out in postcolonial British fiction and film, employing Brooks’s understanding of desire as the ‘mandate’ under which we can describe narrative, ‘which needs metonymy as the figure of linkage in the signifying chain: precedence and consequence, the movement from one detail to another, the movement toward totalization.’<sup>34</sup> My foregrounding of desire as an organising paradigm serves a number of purposes. Firstly, according to Joyce Wexler, ‘[n]ational identity needs some unifying principle that transcends empirical experience, some conviction that events are related to one another, some constant to establish a pattern among events.’<sup>35</sup> Understanding Britishness through a set of acted-out or repressed desires therefore locates the extra-empirical convictions that Wexler suggests are required. Desire is also a less politically neutral term than imagination, entailing both utopian elements (desire for something better) and dystopian factors (repression of socially-prohibited desires).

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<sup>34</sup> Brooks, p. 91.

<sup>35</sup> Joyce Wexler, ‘What is a Nation? Magic Realism and National Identity in *Midnight’s Children* and *Clear Light of Day*’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 37 (2002), 137-55 (p. 138).

In my relation of desire to myths of identity and nationhood I draw on a number of psychoanalytic theorists. Despite Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's critique of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic approach (most notably in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*), I refer to a variety of works both by Freud and by Deleuze and Guattari. I do this because existing critical work on the different genres that I engage has drawn widely from the various theorists. I am not concerned with advocating a new or decisive psychoanalytic theory, but with illustrating how various understandings of desire are manifested in the fictions that I examine. My first three chapters engage with Freudian constructions of desire amongst other things: Chapter One, devoted to the Bildungsroman, considers Oedipal understandings of desire as set out in *The Interpretation of Dreams*; Chapter Two, on the Gothic, engages with Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny' to bring to light elements of doubling, repression and unhomeliness enacted in the fictions; and Chapter Three, concerned with comedy, interrogates notions of transgression and subversion brought to light in his 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' essay.

However, the last chapter, organised around analysis of the national romance and subcultural urban fiction genres, marks a partial turn away from Freudian accounts of desire. Deleuze and Guattari critique the Freudian association between desire and lack, instead understanding desire as productive. They reinterpret the relationship between the subject and desire as follows:

[T]he subject – produced as a residuum alongside the machine, as an appendix, or as a spare part adjacent to the machine – passes through all the degrees of the circle, and passes from one circle to another. This subject itself is not at the center, which is occupied by the machine, but on the periphery, with no

fixed identity, forever decentered, *defined* by the states through which it passes.<sup>36</sup>

If the subject can be defined as such, according to the desires that propel it, this has implications for the nation as equally created by desire, passing through an ever greater multitude of states as dictated by its desiring machines. Furthermore, unlike Freud's interpretation of desire as resulting from lack, for Deleuze and Guattari lack is a 'deliberate creation' and a 'function of market economy [...] the art of a dominant class.'<sup>37</sup> The thematised relationship between the canny creation of a lack in order to sell, sell, sell and what sometimes seems the unquenchable thirst for consumption and consummation in contemporary literature place desire firmly in the field of late capitalist production, a concept that I relate to the commodification of identities in my final chapter.

René Girard's understanding of desire also plays a part in the final chapter: bridging Freudian and Deleuzean notions of desire, Girard asserts that desire is always triangular, involving a subject, an object and (most importantly) a mediator. Rather than being libidinal or mechanical, Girard portrays desire as always mediated through an Other. As such:

The mediation begets a second desire exactly the same as the mediator's. This means that one is always confronted with two competing desires. The mediator can no longer act his role of model without also acting or appearing to act the role of obstacle.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire & the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 7.

The parallels with the Oedipus complex are evident, with the father taking the role of mediator of the child's desire, becoming both role model and opponent.

However, Girard's theory is much more widely applicable, and offers an alternative site for the generation of desire. In my final chapter I consider the way that a consumerist society utilises the figure of the mediator in order to produce certain types of desire. Unlike the other theories discussed, Girard's notion disrupts a linear projection of desire from self to object:

The objective and subjective fallacies are one and the same; both originate in the image we all have of our own desires. Subjectivisms and objectivisms, romanticisms and realisms, individualisms and scientisms, idealisms and positivisms appear to be in opposition but are secretly in agreement to conceal the presence of the mediator. All these dogmas are the aesthetic or philosophic translation of world views peculiar to internal mediation. They all depend directly or indirectly to the lie of spontaneous desire. They all defend the same illusion of autonomy to which modern man is passionately devoted.<sup>39</sup>

Questioning the 'lie of spontaneous desire' will form an important component of my critique throughout the thesis, as such a formulation prioritises the free and autonomous human subject supposed by romanticising (Western) discourse. In alignment with my postcolonial project I therefore assure that third parties and external factors are taken into consideration, acknowledging that there is not a level playing field (in terms of marketing, capital, gender, class, for example) from which to base my readings of the texts.

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<sup>39</sup> Girard, p. 16.

It would be difficult to consider desire and the interpellation of postcolonial subjects without reference to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), a text that pinpoints the overwhelming desire for whiteness experienced by black subjects, thereby positing a subjectivity that is internally fractured and enslaved as opposed to the free and autonomous subjectivity often assumed by Western philosophies. Fanon diagnoses the problem as follows:

Ontology – once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside – does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.<sup>40</sup>

Whilst Fanon's work was originally published in 1952, it continues to resonate in its articulation of the interdependency of desire, articulating a pre-Girardean sense of desire that is mediated by and located in an Other.

Nevertheless, Ranjana Khanna alerts us to the sensitivity with which we, as postcolonial critics, must approach psychoanalysis, as she states quite starkly that it is a 'colonial discipline.' Khanna supports this claim by arguing that '[a] colonial intellectual formation disciplines a way of being as much as it establishes a form of analysis based in the age of colonialism and constitutive of concepts of the primitive against which the civilising mission could establish itself.'<sup>41</sup> Yet by rejecting a Freudian model of repression and assimilation in favour of a state of critical melancholia, Khanna presents a useful tool for postcolonial psychoanalytic theory. This allows for 'a critical relation to the [putatively] lost and to the buried,' meaning that the work of mourning is never complete: the object is never forgotten and

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<sup>40</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Paladin, 1972), p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 6.

continues critically to be engaged.<sup>42</sup> Khanna suggests that this ‘becomes the basis for an ethico-political understanding of colonial pasts, postcolonial presents, and utopian futures.’<sup>43</sup> Part of the work of my thesis, especially in Chapter Two, is accordingly to read various ways in which authors have attempted to maintain a critical relationship to the past, refusing to allow the traumatic wounds of colonial histories to close and be forgotten.

Desire is also a useful construction when considering narratives in the wake of Brooks’s assertion of desire’s function as a narrative tool. He superimposes ‘psychic functioning on textual functioning’ to illustrate the ‘movement *toward* totalization under the mandate of desire.’<sup>44</sup> This illustrates the importance of desire as a structuring tool in fictions of Britishness, as well as the potential of fictions (both novels and films) to re-imagine Britain and possibly shape its future. As Mark Currie asserts, ‘the archive is not a passive record, but an active producer of the present in anticipation of its recollection’ and ‘in life the future does not exist yet, but in narrative fiction it does,’ illustrating fiction’s potential for shaping our understanding of both the present and the future.<sup>45</sup> Although desire is often retrospective (*‘concupiscence rétrospective*, desire oriented toward an irrecoverable past’), it often converges with a future-oriented desire (*‘désir prospectif*, desire in and for the future’). The implications for national identity are apparent: by returning to Britain’s colonial past and legacies as we see addressed in postcolonial fictions, there is a

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<sup>42</sup> Khanna, *Dark Continents*, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Khanna, *Dark Continents*, p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> Brooks, pp. 90, 91. Narrative desire can be driven by Eros, a ‘large embracing force, totalizing in intent, tending towards combination in new unities’ (p. 106) or Thanatotic, a ‘desire as persistent as it is incoherent, a desire whose lack of satisfaction gives death as the only alternative, but whose satisfaction would also be death’ (p. 58).

<sup>45</sup> Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 12, p. 18.

simultaneous ‘désir prospectif’ oriented toward shaping ideas of Britishness in the future.<sup>46</sup>

### **Literary-Critical Context of *The Satanic Verses***

As there is already a vast amount of criticism surrounding the ‘Rushdie Affair,’ my analysis in the main body of the thesis will be primarily concerned with using Rushdie’s novel as a starting point for examining the different genres of literature that the novel participates in. Criticism surrounding the novel and the ensuing ‘Affair’ has tended to revolve around questions of freedom of speech and the right to be protected from offence, the specifics of which I will address more precisely in Chapter One. For now, I limit my summary to some of the key routes that debate surrounding the ‘Affair’ took.

Homi Bhabha praised Rushdie’s book, interrogating many of its problematics as part of a wider theorisation of hybrid or in-between spaces that carry ‘the burden of meaning of the culture.’<sup>47</sup> In his words:

The conflict of cultures and community around *The Satanic Verses* has been mainly represented in spatial terms and binary geopolitical polarities – Islamic fundamentalists vs. Western literary modernists, the quarrel of the ancient (ascriptive) migrants and modern (ironic) metropolitans. This obscures the anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity that articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny, disjunctive

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<sup>46</sup> I am borrowing Brooks’s terms (p. 77).

<sup>47</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 38.

temporality that is, at once, the *time* of cultural displacement, and the *space* of the 'untranslatable'.<sup>48</sup>

For Bhabha, the binary oppositions that define the way the 'Affair' has been represented are not as interesting as the hybrid cultural identities that Rushdie animates, in a way that destabilises polarities by working on the borderline.

Taking a different theoretical route to Bhabha's celebration of the deconstruction of binaries enabled in *The Satanic Verses*, Gayatri Spivak complicates the notion of offense in order to challenge the frequently-cited polarisation of fundamentalism versus freedom of speech. For Spivak:

The question is not if the book is blasphemous. The question is not even the profound belief of heretics and blasphemers. The question is rather: how is blasphemy to be punished? Can it be punished? What is the distinction between punishment and nourishment? And further, in the name of what do we judge the punishers?<sup>49</sup>

By deconstructing the premises on which the 'Affair' has frequently been conceptualised, Spivak forces us to re-evaluate the racist double standards that suggest 'freedom of expression' and 'other normative and private rational abstractions' (read religious affiliation?) are mutually exclusive. This enables Spivak to 'recode the conflict as racism versus fundamentalism.'<sup>50</sup>

Sara Suleri complicates the suggestion that Rushdie's novel is offensive in yet another way, terming it instead a 'deeply Islamic book' and supporting her claim by arguing

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<sup>48</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Reading *The Satanic Verses*' in *What is an Author?* ed. by Maurice Biriotti and Nicola Miller (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 104-34 (p. 110).

<sup>50</sup> Spivak, 'Reading *The Satanic Verses*', p. 126.

that ‘the text perversely demands to be read as a gesture of wrenching loyalty, suggesting that blasphemy can be expressed only within the compass of belief.’<sup>51</sup> As such, Suleri attempts to release the text from the binary into which it has been forced.

Tariq Modood locates his critique alternatively in socio-political specifics and considers the case of British Muslims, outlining reasons for offence and noting some particularities that more generalising accounts have ignored. Modood notes that British Muslim anger over *The Satanic Verses* was largely limited to South Asian Muslims that were provoked by the ‘lampooning of the Prophet’: ‘[t]his sensitivity has nothing to do with Qur’anic fundamentalism but with South Asian reverence of Muhammad (deemed by many Muslims, including fundamentalists, to be excessive) and cultural insecurity as experienced in England and even more profoundly in India.’<sup>52</sup> Modood interprets the politics behind the reactions (such as book-burnings in Bradford and the bombing of bookstores) as consequent of Britain’s ‘significant Asian working class [...] devotion to the Prophet [being] strongest among the rural peasantry from which Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants to Britain [...] originate.’<sup>53</sup> He uses these cultural specifics to argue for a more pluralistic legal approach in Britain, whereby ‘[e]quality [...] may be best served by giving a minority group a legal protection that the majority does not want for itself.’<sup>54</sup> This response takes cultural and political frameworks seriously so as to outline the practical implications suggested by the novel’s fallout.

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<sup>51</sup> Sara Suleri, ‘Contraband Histories: Salman Rushdie and the Embodiment of Blasphemy’, in *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, ed. by D. M. Fletcher (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 221-35 (pp. 222, 223).

<sup>52</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 106.

<sup>53</sup> Modood, *Multicultural Politics*, pp. 106-07.

<sup>54</sup> Modood, *Multicultural Politics*, p. 111.

Instead of trying to deconstruct the polarities that have arisen in critical responses, Vijay Mishra tackles the apparent irresolvability of the conflict, stating that ‘*The Satanic Verses* has generated a number of discourses that quite simply are incommensurable with each other on any count.’<sup>55</sup> To justify this claim Mishra goes back to Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of the ‘différend,’ defined as a conflict that is irresolvable ‘for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments,’ in which ‘[o]ne side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy.’<sup>56</sup> Lyotard asserts that to judge both parties by the same rule would wrong at least one of the parties involved. Mishra understands the Rushdie Affair to be operating around this kind of conflict, whereby the discourses employed are mutually exclusive. I will push this argument further in Chapter One, where I consider the problems posed by providing a secular challenge to religious discourse. Mishra’s postulated solution to resolving a problem rooted in mutually exclusive discourses has important repercussions for my thesis:

To give the différend any real presence or effectiveness, to make it legitimate in spite of the absence of assimilative linkages between the phrase regimens of the competing ideas, one needs to recast the phrases themselves through new idioms in order that the elements that make up a phrase – its referent (what it is about, the case), its sense (what the case signifies), the person to whom it is addressed (the addressee), the person through whom the case is made (the addressor) – can be given new meaning.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Vijay Mishra, ‘Postcolonial Différend: Diasporic Narratives of Salman Rushdie’, in *Salman Rushdie*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 2003), pp. 7-45 (p. 31).

<sup>56</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), xi.

<sup>57</sup> Mishra, p. 40.

This is what I will attempt to do in my reading of Rushdie's infamous text. Rather than revolving around a frequently cited set of arguments regarding taboo, blasphemy, offence and freedom of speech, my analysis resituates the text in relation to the genres in which it participates. Hans Robert Jauss argues that genres variously create a 'horizon of expectations'; thus the way that we understand the novel will depend on a number of factors, such as our own readerly preferences, the way that the book has been marketed (as a work of Gothic, Bildungsroman or comedy, for example) and the situation in which we come to read it.<sup>58</sup> My consideration of *The Satanic Verses* in relation to different genres within which it participates moves the parameters of critique, 'recasting' the novel 'through new idioms' in order to generate new meanings.

I have chosen to return to this text because I believe it to be seminal in the work of writing postcolonial Britain: it raises a number of relevant questions about inclusion and exclusion, Self and Other, the writing of place, the construction of identity, the uses of comedy and the exoticisation of migrants and inter-cultural relationships, as well as participating in a variety of debates and genres. Besides the attention drawn to the novel in the wake of the 'Affair,' its conceptual richness lends itself to reconsideration in light of subsequent literary and filmic output. Considering *The Satanic Verses* will illustrate the way that even the most prestigious postcolonial novels participate in genres, and in doing so concurrently raise the profile of postcolonial genre studies. I will therefore use *The Satanic Verses* as the starting point for each chapter, before moving onto ways that other authors/scriptwriters have

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<sup>58</sup> Jauss, p. 131.

engaged with similar concerns, sometimes building on and at others times problematising or even directly critiquing Rushdie's work.

### **Chapter Outline**

My first chapter concerns itself with the Bildungsroman genre, focussing on ways in which it is used to convey a desire for meaning, both on personal and national levels. In the following chapter, on Gothic texts, I examine the elision between desire and fear, tracking the relationship between traditional Gothic and postcolonial Gothic and considering how a desire for trauma manifests itself in the creation or reimagining of a national history. Chapter Three tackles comedy, with a focus on film rather than fiction as the most widely-consumed medium for bringing comedy to the general public. There I explore two contrasting strains of desire in postcolonial comedy, which are manifested either in the desire for a happy multiculturalism at the expense of the unfortunate occlusion of those that do not fit the picture, or in the use of laughter as an alternative response to feelings of fear. Finally, Chapter Four locates desire in a capitalist system, focusing on national romance and subcultural urban fiction genres in order to explore physical desires that can be exploited for retail profit, as well as the commodification of identities through their performative production. This thesis is not exhaustive in its discussion of genres, and in the conclusion I will point towards other genres in which *The Satanic Verses* participates, and new directions that this research could take. What I aim to illustrate is the way that each time genres expand to include postcolonial topics, the boundaries of genre are redrawn and postcolonial theory must adapt to address a new set of questions. The innovative synthesis of postcolonial literature and criticism, genre theory, psychoanalytic theories of desire

and constructions of Britishness that I enable within this thesis will breathe new life into each of the disciplines.

## Chapter One

### **‘Solid, unchanging, sempiternal, instead of the creature of cracks and absences’: (Em)Bracing Hybridity in the Bildungsroman**

To open my discussion of genre and its relation to the re-imagining of Britishness, my first chapter turns to the Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age narrative. This genre is predisposed towards discussions of identity and identity-in-crisis, as protagonists consider various ontologies that they will either accept or reject in their paths to adulthood, self-awareness and autonomy. Different ontologies that the protagonists favour signify divergent sets of desires, ranging from desires for authority, purity and absolutism to plurality, discontinuity and hedonism. A key term that I use to focus my discussion of these various desires is ‘hybridity’ (outlined in the ‘Embracing Hybridity’ subsection), which is an overarching ontology that the novels I analyse either accept or reject. Starting with Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, I discuss the challenge to purity and absolutism that is made manifest through new and hybridising ways of constructing identity. I then consider a concurrent and potentially paradoxical nostalgia for authority that is represented through absent fathers in *The Satanic Verses*, Hanif Kureishi’s *The Black Album* (1995) and Robin Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road From Damascus* (2008). Questions of authority are then engaged via a discussion of stylistic choices that tend towards either realist or metafictional modes of representation. Hybrid identities are challenged, I argue, by foregrounding the painful processes associated with moving between identities, an argument that I support with reference to *The Road from Damascus* and Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* (1999). To conclude the chapter I turn to Aboulela’s *The Translator* and

*Minaret* (2005) in which religion is re-centred as a means of communal identification. The recentralisation of religion in the novels is marked via the use of metaphors of rebirth and conversion to understand processes of identification as well as the prioritisation of a religious identity that can transcend national borders. I argue throughout that the foregrounding of religious discourse in the novels is linked to a quest for new narratives of Britishness that are open to alternative ways of identifying.

### **Deconstructing a Global Binary**

Before moving into my analysis of the novels proper, I shall firstly outline their socio-political contexts and explain my use of hybridity as a defining paradigm and potential tool for breaking down binary approaches to cultural relationships. Hybridity, as I shall go on to outline, is often called upon as an alternative model to fixed or binary understandings of identity that pose Self against Other. The binary that dominates current media debate is that of political freedom versus religious fundamentalism, particularly in the wake of 9/11 and highlighted once again through coverage of the recent Arab uprisings. It is important to understand the binaries that gain currency in contemporary society in order to appreciate factors weighing on identity construction as reflected in my selected fiction.

To give a backdrop to the history of this binary, it is useful to turn briefly to Adam Curtis's documentary, *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), in which he outlines two responses to the failure of the liberal dream to build a better world: firstly American neo-Conservatism with its roots in Leo Strauss's theory that one needs myths of nation and religion to combat selfish individualism, and secondly a more political Islam designed to keep individualism in check. Curtis locates the origin of the latter

movement in the Egyptian Sayed Kotb's work after he visited America and saw the social corruption and decay brought about by the same selfish individualism that Strauss sought to fight.<sup>1</sup>

Kotb<sup>2</sup> finds Americans 'primitive,' an accusation that he supports anecdotally by relating stories about disrespect around the dead, irreverent attitudes towards church attendance, unabashed sexual mores and bad taste, concluding that 'America's virtues are the virtues of production and organization, and not those of human and social morals.'<sup>3</sup> Due (at least in part) to the putative moral and social corruption that he found in America, Kotb wrote his best-known work, concerning the socio-political role of Islam: *Social Justice in Islam* (1949), in which he offered a powerful critique of the solely economic basis of Cold War politics, instead proposing Islam as an ideology covering political and spiritual needs alike. The aim of this book was to encourage people to believe that there was an alternative to both material-based systems and to 'private' religions that have limited social function. Kotb is a forerunner and spokesperson for Islamism – an ideology that Olivier Roy describes simply as 'the unification of the religious and the political' – and has influenced a spectrum of Islamist thinkers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear*, dir. by Adam Curtis (BBC, 2004). For Leo Strauss's ideology see further *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1964) and *What is Political Philosophy?* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Various Sayyid, Said, Syed, Seyyid or Sayid; Qutb, Koteb, Qutub or Kutb.

<sup>3</sup> Sayyid Qutb, "The America I Have Seen": In the Scale of Human Values (1951)', trans. by Tarek Masoud and Ammar Fakeeh, in *America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature An Anthology 1895-1995*, ed. by Kamal Abdel-Malek (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 9-27 (pp. 26-27).

<sup>4</sup> Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: C. Hurst, 2004), p. 3.

Regardless of the real power of either 'Islamism' or neo-liberalism, it is undeniable that our *understanding* of said systems and their roles in world politics is filtered through media that frequently distort and present binaries as ways of identifying Self (be it capitalist, secular, Western, 'good') and Other (be it communist, religious, non-Western, 'evil').<sup>5</sup> Curtis suggests that the end of the Cold War created a void in potential threat, until the War on Terror provided (or created) a suitable enemy in the form of radical Islam and the threat of international terrorism – a threat that Curtis argues is largely a 'fantasy that has been exaggerated and distorted by politicians.' Curtis's documentary is structured around the binary identified by Samuel Huntington, who suggests that '[t]he rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations,' theorising a world in which difference is equated with conflict.<sup>6</sup> Huntington similarly connects America's past and present enemies by drawing (very selective) comparisons between the 'Islamic Resurgence' and Marxism; he cites similarities between the two systems that include 'scriptural texts, a vision of the perfect society, commitment to fundamental change, rejection of the powers that be and the nation state, and doctrinal diversity ranging from moderate reformist to violent revolutionary.'<sup>7</sup> The links that Huntington makes between Marxism and political Islam (though necessarily tenuous, considering the decisively anti-religious bent of traditional Marxism and the rejection of Marxist atheism by Islamism), illustrate why

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning at this point that the above binary largely operates within western public discourse, whereas in other political climates different binaries are arguably seen as predominant. As Talal Asad notes regarding India, 'the publicly recognizable personality of the nation is strongly mediated by representations of a high-caste Hinduism, and those who do not fit into that personality are inevitably defined as religious minorities.' (Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 8).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Free Press, 2002), p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Huntington, p. 111.

the change in enemies might so easily have occurred for the West.<sup>8</sup> The effect of Huntington's book has been influential, despite the work that his critics have subsequently done to illustrate how destructive and misleading a force it has been.<sup>9</sup> An opponent of Huntington, Amartya Sen views the simplistic classification of 'civilisations' as 'much more confrontational than the universe of plural and diverse classifications that shape the world in which we actually live' and warns that '[t]he reductionism of high theory can make a major contribution, often inadvertently, to the violence of low politics.'<sup>10</sup> Throughout *Identity and Violence*, Sen notes the danger of forcing people into one primary identity to the point of exclusion of all others in the manner that Huntington attempts.

Though I have heretofore spoken only of the United States and Arab political Islam, Britain has also played a significant role in this global affair. When Tony Blair allied Britain with the United States during the 'War on Terror' it crucially alienated a host of predominantly migrant Muslim communities at home by positing Islamism (a term often used interchangeably with Islam in the media) as the enemy, the Other of Britain. This moment accelerated the shift in modes of identification in postcolonial Britain from nation-based to religion-based qualifiers: rather than British Asian, people were increasingly identifying or being identified as British Muslim.<sup>11</sup> To shift from national to religious signifiers suggests a revolution in the way that Britishness is

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<sup>8</sup> Later in the chapter I critically frame the West as a discursive category and challenge its unhelpful homogenisation, though I have used it above in the sense conveyed by Huntington.

<sup>9</sup> See Edward Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance', *The Nation*, 22 October 2001 <<http://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance>> [accessed 21 February 2011]. Also, Said Shirazi, 'Your New Enemies', *Dissident Voice* (3 November 2002) <[http://dissidentvoice.org/Articles/Shirazi\\_Huntington.htm](http://dissidentvoice.org/Articles/Shirazi_Huntington.htm)> [accessed 30 September 2010].

<sup>10</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity & Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. xvi.

<sup>11</sup> In Britain this is a process that began during the Rushdie Affair.

constructed and accordingly potentially opens up space for authors to re-narrate Britain. Comparable to the way that Curtis identifies secular and religious responses to the ideological void following the Cold War, this shift in constructions of Britishness has led to literatures dealing with the pain of loss, powerlessness and absence of meaning (secular topics), along with recuperative visions and searches for new meanings and sources of identity (often found in religion).

### **Embracing Hybridity**

One way of conceptually combating the supposed binaries assumed for the purposes of the ‘War on Terror’ would be to turn to the likes of Homi Bhabha with his apparently liberating theories of hybridity. Hybridity is a concept that has long been celebrated in postcolonial theory as a tool for undermining hierarchical binary oppositions adopted during the colonial period and perpetuated into contemporary politics and psychologies. However, the term has a complex history that means it has not always been understood in such an optimistic manner. In *Colonial Desire*, Robert Young clarifies that ‘[t]he word “hybrid” has developed from biological and botanical origins [...]. In the nineteenth century it was used to refer to a physiological phenomenon; in the twentieth century it has been reactivated to describe a cultural one.’<sup>12</sup> Yet the term’s ‘reactivation’ – Young argues – could not shed the cultural and ideological baggage attached to the prior use of the term, that had been used to justify racist agendas and variously associated with miscegenation, infertility and degeneracy. It would, as such, appear to be an unusual term for a postcolonial theorist to employ; nevertheless, Bhabha sees fit to appropriate the term for a new agenda.

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<sup>12</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 6.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha proposes hybridity – defined as the space ‘where cultural differences “contingently” and conflictually touch’ – as a way of resisting the Manichean binaries ‘of racial and cultural groups,’ a conceptual tool for challenging those that have perceived those groups ‘as homogenous polarized political consciousnesses.’<sup>13</sup> Casting a utopian gaze on the world he argues, ‘I like to think there is overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and transcultural sense of the hybridity of imagined communities.’<sup>14</sup> Hybridity, in this sense, can be understood as presenting a relational rather than an oppositional picture of inter-cultural relations and identities, in which it is the ‘the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of the culture.’<sup>15</sup>

In the course of this chapter I initially outline ways in which the concept of hybridity is embraced by both Bhabha and Rushdie, before illustrating how contemporary authors have questioned the practicalities of occupying its liminal and in-between spaces. In this literature there is evidence of a recent (re)turn to more concrete modes of identification, which illustrates the desire for communal identifications. Young’s aforementioned book, first published in 1995 during a period of ‘new stability, self-assurance and quietism,’ convincingly suggests that ‘[f]ixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change.’<sup>16</sup> However, since 9/11 and the concurrent rise of Islamophobia, that sense of stability has been disrupted once again for many communities, bringing the desire for (re)definitions of identities back to the fore. By examining a range of texts published since *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, it is possible to map a change in attitude towards the concept of hybridity, as

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<sup>13</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 207.

<sup>14</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> Young, p. 4.

well as an increasing desire to renegotiate identities as the world is reshuffled in the period following 9/11.

Bhabha frequently draws on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as exemplary of hybrid peoples and places, largely celebrating the author's fiction. He attempts to defend the novel from much of the opposition that was raised against it, stating:

The conflict of cultures and community around *The Satanic Verses* has been mainly represented in spatial terms and binary geopolitical polarities – Islamic fundamentalists vs. Western literary modernists, the quarrel of the ancient (ascriptive) migrants and modern (ironic) metropolitans. This obscures the anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity that articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny, disjunctive temporality that is, at once, the *time* of cultural displacement, and the *space* of the 'untranslatable'.<sup>17</sup>

As such, the theorist tries to draw the novel out of the ideological binary that it seemed to have fallen into over the preceding years, instead celebrating the 'culture of hybridity' that he argues is set up by the novel.

Hybridity *can* play a vital role in the deconstruction of binaries; however, Bhabha's analysis is selective. Whilst Rushdie's novel does indeed negotiate ideas of hybridity, deconstructing binaries as it goes along, the power and allure of authority is nevertheless strongly felt, acting as a precursor for some of the issues that the novelists analysed later in this chapter begin to take up. The extended quotation that includes my chapter title – 'the well-worn phrases, unfinished business, grandstand

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<sup>17</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 6.

view, made her feel solid, unchanging, sempiternal, instead of the creature of cracks and absence she knew herself to be,' captures the divergent impulses towards identification that my chapter is structured around (*Satanic Verses* 8). We might read into the self-evacuating terminology of 'cracks and absences' a desire for a comfortingly solid and unchanging identity. However, this reading would go against the grain of the rest of the novel, in which to feel 'solid, unchanging' would be a symptom of a grand delusion, against which Rushdie pits the flux and change of hybrid identities.

### Challenging Purity

One of the key questions posed by Rushdie's infamous novel is '[h]ow does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?' (8). As Rushdie himself answers in *Imaginary Homelands*: '[m]élange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. [...] *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves.'<sup>18</sup> Rushdie's work is itself a reclamation of identity, as he rescues terms like 'hybrid,' 'impurity' and 'mongrel' from the negative connotations with which poets such as Jackie Kay had recently associated them.<sup>19</sup> But in doing so he simultaneously creates a new binary, where 'the absolutism of the Pure' is to be feared and combated.<sup>20</sup> *The Satanic Verses* boasts a plethora of characters that fall on either side of this binary, and the spokespeople for absolutism or uncompromising ideas are often demonised or ridiculed.

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<sup>18</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 394. Original emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> In her poem 'So you think I'm a mule?' Jackie Kay dismisses terms such as 'hybrid', 'mulatto' and 'half-caste' for carrying connotations of impurity and miscegenation (refer back to Young's genealogy of the term). Jackie Kay, 'So you think I'm a mule', in *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998*, ed. by James Procter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 202-04.

<sup>20</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 394.

Two contrasting ways of understanding identity and the essentialism of selfhood are summarised by Muhammad Sufyan, owner of the Shandaar Café, when he tries to comfort his guest Saladin. It is worth quoting at length:

For example, great Lucretius tells us, in *De Rerum Natura*, this following thing: *quod-cumque suis mutatum finibus exit, continuo hoc mors est illius quod fuit ante*. Which being translated, forgive my clumsiness, is ‘Whatever by its changing goes out of its frontiers,’ – that is, bursts its banks, - or, maybe, breaks out of its limitations, - so to speak, disregards its own rules, but that is too free, I am thinking... ‘that thing’, at any rate, Lucretius holds, ‘by doing so brings immediate death to its old self’. However [...] poet Ovid, in the *Metamorphoses*, takes diametrically opposed view. He avers thus: ‘As yielding wax’ – heated, you see, possible for the sealing of documents or such, - ‘is stamped with new designs And changes shape and seems not still the same, Yet is indeed the same, even so our souls,’ – you hear, good sir? Our spirits! Our immortal essences! – ‘Are still the same forever, but adopt In their migrations ever-varying forms.’ (276-77)

In a typically Rushdie-esque gesture the language carefully mimics what is being spoken of: when speaking of Lucretius the words themselves seem to escape grammatical strictures with endless clauses, sub-clauses and ellipses, whilst in the Ovidean section there is the introduction of random capital letters for seemingly unimportant words (‘And’, ‘In’): the language itself adopts ‘ever-varying forms’ that it has nevertheless always had in it. The way that the dilemma is presented seems to subtly side with the Ovidean perspective, as the language does not die with its

rejuvenation or transformation but seems to have always had that unrealised potential within.

A prime advocate of the 'Pure' is a Sikh terrorist whose body, laden with bombs, 'provided her answer' as to 'what manner of cause' she and her accomplices are: '[a]re we uncompromising, absolute, strong, or will we show ourselves to be timeservers, who compromise, trim and yield?' (81). The manner in which the head terrorist sees herself as embodying, or becoming her cause, signifies its purity and absolutism: '[w]hat manner of cause *are we?*' [my emphasis] not 'what manner of cause is it/do we support?' Saladin notices a visual unity between her body and the bombs, as he imagines the grenades to be 'like extra breasts nestling in her cleavage,' implying the absence of an extra-corporeal dimension to the all-encompassing idea that she has come to embody (81). Through Rushdie's terrorists (who gain an uncanny new resonance in the post-9/11 world), the author is able to question advocates of the absolute: all those who embody such uncompromising ideals that they are prepared to martyr themselves to the Grand Idea. The irony of this is that during the Rushdie Affair, Rushdie suggested that there are some ideals that *should* be uncompromising and for which he was willing to risk his own life in defence, such as the freedom of speech and the right to blaspheme. It might be better, therefore, to reconceptualise the novel's binary not as purity versus hybridity, but as religion versus reason, terms that Rushdie suggests are mutually exclusive in his recent memoir.<sup>21</sup>

Rushdie levels his accusations higher than the faith of religious individuals by questioning the uncompromising nature of religious faith itself, as in order to be fully

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<sup>21</sup> Rushdie describes 'religion as the enemy of the intellect'. Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), p. 177.

believed in, an idea must be absolute, something which in turn seems to make it a little pathetic in its inability to withstand questioning. When the ‘Prophet Messenger Businessman’ (118), the controversially-named Mahound, attempts to incorporate the three main goddesses of the Jahilians, (Al-)Lat, Uzza and Manat, into his verses, the Grandee’s wife, Hind, points out the error of his compromise, eventually causing the Prophet to retract the previously uttered verses as satanic:

I am your equal [...] I don’t want you to become weak. You shouldn’t have done what you did. [...] If you are for Allah, I am for Al-Lat. And she doesn’t believe your God when he recognizes her. Her opposition to him is implacable, irrevocable, engulfing. The war between us cannot end in truce. And what a truce! Yours is a patronising, condescending lord. (121)

Herein lies the problem of religious faith according to the narrative: the absolute cannot compromise for to do so would make it weak and not worthy of belief. Yet if it cannot question itself, it is unable to face the questions that the novel instructs must be asked of any idea in order to test its strength and value (335).

Part of the work of undermining the absolute in *The Satanic Verses* is enabled through the use of comedy. As Otto Cone (father of Allie, Gibreel’s lover) decrees, ‘[a]nybody ever tries to tell you how this most beautiful and most evil of planets is somehow homogenous, composed only of reconcilable elements, that it all *adds up*, you get on the phone to the straitjacket tailor’ (295). The comedy derives from the incongruous idea of a straitjacket being tailor-made, as if people would calmly go along to be measured and fitted. The tone draws on the superiority of the reader, as the assumption is made that the audience and the teller of the joke are in cahoots,

laughing at the butts of the joke: believers in the absolute, in all-encompassing theories. As Susan Purdie argues in *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*:

The [...] relationship formed [...] between the joke's Teller and its Audience [...] depends upon and creates their object's exclusion. This generates a delicious intimacy, which is pleasurable and powerful in itself, for some important parts of the joking utterance remain tacit [...] so that the joking moment allows an unusual and potent joint subjectivity.<sup>22</sup>

In order to indulge in a 'delicious intimacy' with Otto Cone, it is necessary to adopt his views. Yet this also reminds us of the covert binary that is being created in a novel that has as its apparent aim the celebration of hybridity; the use of comedy that implies superiority over the butt of the joke recalls an oppositional 'us versus them' dichotomy. I return to Rushdie's deployment of satire in Chapter Three.

The novel questions, '[w]hat is the opposite of faith?' and provides its own answer: '[n]ot disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief. Doubt' (92). So doubt is the route chosen by his protagonists: doubt about the existence of higher powers, doubt about reality, doubt over their own sanity. Yet this in-between-ness, this uncertainty, is often painful for the characters, and it is the pain of a sense of loss of meaning that is shared with the other novels that this chapter examines.

### **'Mustafa's official version': Loss of God, the Father, Authority**

So in what context do these characters submerge themselves in doubt? In *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11*, Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate suggest that:

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 5.

Whereas Matthew Arnold and the other giants of nineteenth century literary scepticism famously experienced the death of the Judaeo-Christian God as a terrifying, even bewildering, loss, Amis, McEwan, Pullman and Rushdie [in his 2008 novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*] depict it as a natural, inevitable and entirely welcome phenomenon that is no more traumatic than disbelief in Zeus, Thor or Father Xmas.<sup>23</sup>

Yet the novelists that I consider here (even Rushdie in his earlier *The Satanic Verses*) share a Muslim background and write *against* the trend that Bradley and Tate have identified amongst ‘new atheists.’ In their works even if the idea of a God is not wholeheartedly embraced, the absence or ‘God-Shaped Hole’ is painfully experienced by the various protagonists, recapturing the sense of loss for the death of God and the desire to reformulate a basis for meaning.<sup>24</sup> Even Rushdie concedes that he writes, ‘in part, to fill up that emptied God-chamber with other dreams.’<sup>25</sup>

The novels that I analyse share a tendency to conflate fathers with gods, in a similar manner to that theorised by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: ‘[t]o me the derivation of religious needs from the helplessness of the child and a longing for its father seems irrefutable.’<sup>26</sup> The connection between childish needs and religious mores as articulated by Freud is reflected through the portrayal of protagonists that retain elements of childishness as a metaphor for their senses of

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> I use the term ‘Muslim’ as Amin Malak has defined, to include ‘the person who believes firmly in the faith of Islam; and/or, via an inclusivist extension, by the person who voluntarily and knowingly refers to herself, for whatever motives, as a “Muslim” when given a selection of identitarian choices; and/or, by yet another generous extension, by the person who is rooted formatively, and emotionally in the culture and civilization of Islam.’ Malak, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 377.

<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 10.

religious loss. Edward Said articulates the shift from parental to communitarian authority more precisely in terms of bonds and authority. ‘If a filial relationship was held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority – involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict,’ Said argues that an affiliative relationship ‘changes these bonds into what seem to be transpersonal forms – such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture.’ Said describes this as ‘an instance of the passage from nature to culture.’<sup>27</sup> However, the way that affiliative relationships are expressed in the novels is largely dependent upon filiative metaphors, concerning fatherhood, orphaning and birth and thereby blurring the distinction between personal filial relationships and apparently ‘transpersonal’ relationships: affiliative relationships are frequently figured in terms implying their naturalisation. In this section I will continue to focus on Rushdie’s novel in order to highlight father-God relationships, before analysing Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus* and Kureishi’s *The Black Album* in terms of shared tropes of loss and nostalgia for authority. Loss and the associated desire of nostalgia are recurrent tropes that have to date largely been overlooked by critics of *The Satanic Verses*, so here I read against the grain and towards the text’s unconscious, or what must be forfeited in order to celebrate newness, change and hybridity.

Absent fathers litter the texts that I analyse and we can read this as signifying the end of a certain form of authority. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Freud suggests that ‘[i]t is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our

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<sup>27</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 19-20.

mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father.'<sup>28</sup> He understands dreams of killing the father to be a normal stage of (male) childhood development. But what happens when the father-figure is (always) already dead? The three novels mentioned above feature fathers that cannot be challenged because they are dead; the fathers in Yassin-Kassab's and Kureishi's novels died during the protagonists' childhoods, as did Gibreel's father in *The Satanic Verses*, whilst the father of Rushdie's other protagonist, Saladin, dies shortly after a reconciliation with his son. This leaves a gap in the development of the protagonists as they are not able to seize the authority of the father, their fathers having been taken from them too early and against their wills. Using Peter Brooks's formulation for aligning psychoanalytic and textual functioning, it is possible to understand how readers' desires might be manipulated into reflecting those of the protagonist (in this case Saladin). Brooks asserts that 'psychoanalysis promises and requires, that in addition to such usual narratological preoccupations as function, sequence, and paradigm, we engage the dynamic of memory and the history of desire as they work to reshape the recovery of meaning within time.'<sup>29</sup> By rendering the novels' patriarchs present in their absence, the authors ensure that their narratives structurally reflect the psychological absence in the characters' lives, creating desire in the reader for the 'recovery of meaning' as symbolised by the absent fathers. Furthermore, I will outline ways that the fathers of the novels are also symbolic of God, meaning that the moment of death simultaneously signifies the death of the Absolute, of grand narratives, of religion.

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<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Penguin Freud Library*, ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1958), IV: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 364.

<sup>29</sup> Brooks, p. 36.

Yassin-Kassab's novel, *The Road from Damascus*, follows the Londoner Sami Traifi on his long and troubled soul-searching. His spiritual journey takes him down a number of routes, as he dabbles with mind-altering drugs, contests his wife's decision to adopt the *hijab*, attempts an academic lifestyle and returns to his parents' homeland in Syria, all the while struggling with questions of belief and choices that affect both him and his loved ones. Sami suffers a long period of estrangement from his mother, due largely to a (perhaps misplaced) idolisation of his father (Mustafa) who died during his childhood. As a hangover from this childhood admiration and subsequent loss, he frequently refers to 'Mustafa's official version' – the world according to the unquestioned authority of the boy's father.<sup>30</sup> It is only later in the novel that his father is brought down to an earthly level (through his mother's accusations), meaning that Sami is liberated from a one-dimensional view of the world and no longer has to live under his father's shadow.

The moments of realisation that fathers are not the omnipotent, omniscient (and, for some, omnibenevolent) deities of childhood memories are painful instances for the protagonists of the various novels, as is exemplified by Rushdie's Saladin:

Changez Chamchawala had seemed far more godlike to his infant son than any Allah. That this father, this profane deity (albeit now discredited), had dropped to his knees in his old age and started bowing towards Mecca was hard for his godless son to accept. (48)

This section curiously parallels the main work of the novel, as for Saladin's father-God to accept other deities shows weakness in the face of the absolute that he needs his father to be in order to demonstrate any real power, paralleling the implications of

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<sup>30</sup> Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 334. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

allowing the female deities a role in the more controversial section of the narrative; it illustrates the desire for the unwavering absolute. The case of Saladin and his father is especially interesting as his father's godlike authority ironically rests on his devout secularism: if the father is to *be* a god then he must himself be godless.

Yassin-Kassab's Sami similarly feels the pain of loss: '[o]f course his father wasn't up there. His father was far too small, like any of us. Sami felt fear and trembling. Felt the emptiness of a burning heart' (348). The physical pain manipulating Sami's body demonstrates the significance of the loss and reveals the role that his father-as-God formerly occupied. Such an easy, almost unquestioning conflation of an absent father and a non-existent God is most apparent in Kureishi's novel (that I outline fully in the next section), where the protagonist Shahid intimates that '[a]ll this reminded him of his childhood. He wanted to say: wait till Papa finds out. But Papa would never find out and there was, now – he was convinced of it – no one watching over them.'<sup>31</sup> The slippage between knowing that there is no (living, biological) father and making the inductive leap that there is no higher power whatsoever exemplifies the significant weight that fathers have in the novels, as embodiments of absolute authority.

For *The Satanic Verses*'s Gibreel, there is no father involved in his realisation of the absence of God, but his plight serves to demonstrate the life-rending pain of this new knowledge. Confronted with the realisation that 'he was talking to thin air [...] he began to plead into the emptiness, ya Allah, just be there, damn it, just be' (30). In the end he gives up hope and represses his desire for there to be a god, which he attempts to prove by standing 'in the dining-hall of the city's most famous hotel, with pigs

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<sup>31</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 165. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

falling out of his face' (30). Although Gibreel believes the fact that he is not struck down by lightning when he indulges in this irreligious act to signify the *absence* of a higher power, the novel suggests that it is in fact the trigger for his subsequent plight, creating a psychic schism within the protagonist:

Gibreel had spoken to nobody about what had happened after he ate the unclean pigs. The dreams had begun that very night. In these visions he was always present, not as himself but as his namesake, and I don't mean interpreting a role, Spoono, I am him, he is me, I am the bloody archangel, Gibreel himself, large as bloody life. (83)

This point marks the beginning of Gibreel's Multiple Personality Disorder and schizophrenic hallucinations, which are stylistically reflected through the narrative slippage between the third-person voice of the (seemingly satanic) narrator, and the first-person voice of Gibreel, confiding in his new-found friend Saladin (or Spoono). The above description tessellates with Fredric Jameson's designation of schizophrenia, defined as:

[A]n experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the 'I' and the 'me' over time.<sup>32</sup>

Though Gibreel loses a grip on his personal identity in this manner, he is not simultaneously liberated from issues of belief (as Deleuze and Guattari's reading of schizophrenia would have it).<sup>33</sup> Instead, his loss of religious faith appears to be

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<sup>32</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 111-25 (p. 119).

<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari see schizophrenia in a more subversive light than Jameson, as challenging (rather than replicating) late capitalism; for them, because the 'I' doesn't exist in the 1<sup>st</sup> person ('The ego, however, is like daddy-mommy: the schizo

inextricably bound to his loss of personal identity. By losing a singular sense of identity he becomes confused with his identity as an angel (ambiguously benign or fallen), occupying a destabilising and discomfiting position that eventually leads to linguistic breakdown and suicide, the ultimate destruction of the 'I': 'I can't be sure because when they came to call I wasn't myself no yaar not myself at all some days are hard how to tell you what sickness is like something like this but I can't be sure' (544). The loss of faith and a sense of self is not (in this case) liberating or revolutionary – as Deleuze and Guattari would have us believe – but terrifying.

Jameson connects the attributes of schizophrenia with postmodernism, linking the disorientation of the subject to the 'disappearance of a sense of history' that he attributes to a postmodern condition.<sup>34</sup> Anouar Majid similarly makes connections between postmodernism and the pitfalls of hybridity as its dominant ontology, accusing the 'postmodernist school' of 'averting its sight from an economic order whose ramifications on cultural production are blatantly apparent, and in its eagerness to destroy certainties, collaps[ing] everything into a hybridity that callously transforms homelessness and uprootedness into the inescapable condition of our times.'<sup>35</sup> Though this analysis deliberately overlooks postmodernists that *do* place economics as central to postmodernism (such as Jameson, who in the title of his critical manifesto

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has long since ceased to believe in it') so the subject cannot be 'oedipalized.' Deleuze and Guattari, p. 23. As Mark Seem, introducing Deleuze and Guattari's work suggests, schizophrenics 'escape coding, scramble the codes and flee in all directions: [they are] *orphans* (no daddy-mommy-me), *atheists* (no beliefs), and *nomads* (no habits, no territories)'. This scrambling of codes makes them, therefore, bad or anarchic consumers, be it of material or spiritual produce. Mark Seem, 'Introduction', in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. xxi.

<sup>34</sup> Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', p. 125.

<sup>35</sup> Anouar Majid, 'Islam and the Literature of Controversy' in *The Postcolonial Crescent: Islam's Impact on Contemporary Literature*, ed. by John C. Hawley (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), pp. 84-92 (p. 85).

defines postmodernism as ‘The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’), it usefully highlights a postmodernist tendency to focus on the supposed desirability of the collapse of ideology.<sup>36</sup> Unlike Bhabha and Rushdie, Majid refuses to see homelessness or uprootedness as desirable conditions, instead seeing postmodernism as a trap. He provides a very odd interpretation of the Imam, reading decidedly against the grain of Rushdie’s novel to argue that ‘it is [...] perhaps telling that Mahound and the exiled Imam remain untraumatized by the identity crises afflicting Gibreel and Saladin, and instead successfully pioneer new social orders which are now being maligned by the West.’ For Majid, Mahound and the Imam’s “purity” gives them the strength to overcome the banalities of the postmodern condition and create genuine political alternatives.<sup>37</sup> Though a highly unconventional reading of Rushdie’s narrative, it usefully highlights a tension between a celebration of postmodern ways of understanding reality, and the detrimental effects that are nevertheless visited upon characters forced to occupy hybrid spaces.

Despite Rushdie’s own avowal that *The Satanic Verses* ‘celebrates hybridity, [...] rejoices in mongrelisation,’ sections of the narrative nevertheless have a far more elegiac tone and cannot quite bring themselves to celebrate new ways of being.<sup>38</sup> When Saladin’s father dies the tone initially suggests a hopeful embrace of newness – ‘this looked like the start of a new phase, in which the world would be solid and real’ – but the end of the sentence suggests otherwise, as his father’s death means there is no longer ‘the broad figure of a parent standing between himself and the inevitability of the grave’ (534). Saladin is henceforth destined to lead an ‘orphaned life, like

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<sup>36</sup> See further Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> Majid, p. 86.

<sup>38</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 394.

Muhammad's; like everyone's. A life illuminated by a strangely radiant death, which continued to glow, in his mind's eye, like a sort of magic lamp' (534). The allusion to the magic lamp serves a dual purpose; firstly it is the lamp that was withheld from the son throughout the father's life, coveted by the infant but less alluring to the adult; secondly, it refers to 'Aladdin,' one of the most famous stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*, the frame story of which entails Scheherazade, the king's new virgin bride, beginning to tell a new story every night to keep the king in suspense and avoid execution in the morning. This tale is a popular reference-point for Rushdie and the number '1001' – meaning 'infinity' in Arabic – frequently weaves through his narratives; in this case, the lamp is symbolic of life being a deferment of ultimate and inevitable death.<sup>39</sup> The tone of mourning and the sense of being orphaned in a fatherless and/or godless world illustrate a desire for that former authority.

### **Approaching Authority**

The main stylistic difference between Rushdie's novel and those published in the 1990s and early twenty-first century that I discuss here is that whereas Rushdie chooses to express himself in largely metafictional terms, perennially questioning the status of authorship and the role of authority, the other novelists return to realist modes of writing more commonly associated with the Bildungsroman form. This section focuses predominantly on Kureishi's *The Black Album*, a novel that has an interesting intertextual relationship with *The Satanic Verses* as it engages a lot of the

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<sup>39</sup> In *Midnight's Children* there are 1001 children born on the eve of Indian independence; in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, there are 1001 different currents in the story sea, to give a couple of examples. Many more instances can be found in his various novels. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (London: Penguin, 1990); Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 2006).

same arguments regarding the role of the author and theological debates but in a realist rather than a metafictional mode.

Rushdie justifies his choice of magic realism, a form of metafiction that deliberately blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality, as ‘essential’ if one is to ‘describe reality as it is experienced by religious people, for whom God is no symbol but an everyday fact.’ For Rushdie, the ‘rationalism’ of the alternative form – realism – ‘comes to seem like a judgement upon, an invalidation of, the religious faith of the characters being described.’<sup>40</sup> Rushdie’s justification of his choice upholds the necessity of liberation from conventional modes of authorship in order to give voice to the religious content of the novel. However, his choice of a metafictional style of narration is not as innocent as he pretends. First and foremost it is immediately apparent that with the exception of the ‘Parting of the Arabian Sea’ section, the supernatural elements of the novel are almost entirely distinct from anything close to the Muslim religious belief that the author pretends to be stylistically engaging with and would be more appropriate to a Gothic novel, as I shall discuss in the following chapter.<sup>41</sup> A closer interrogation into the way that metafictional style relates to religious content also reveals Rushdie’s defence of his stylistic choice to be flawed.

Roland Barthes’s ‘Death of the Author’ essay has overshadowed all subsequent debates regarding authority and authorship. He argues:

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<sup>40</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 376.

<sup>41</sup> The ‘Parting of the Arabian Sea’ section recounts the Ayesha Hajj in which a village is led into the Arabian Sea. The narrative leaves it ambiguous as to whether the pilgrims drown or walk along the bottom of the ocean to complete their Hajj. Other non-realist elements revolve around ghosts, Mephistophelean narrators and characters with an Angel/Devil complex.

As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.<sup>42</sup>

Barthes clearly sees the symbolic death of the author as a positive step towards liberating the reader and the writing, as meaning and interpretation are released from the grasp of the tyrant author. *The Satanic Verses* parodies this debate by explicitly associating the tyrant author with God. It is worth quoting one such instance at length, in which the narrator offers his analysis of the Lucretian/Ovidean traits demonstrated by Gibreel and Saladin:

Might we not agree that Gibreel [...] has wished to remain, to a large degree, *continuous* – that is, joined to and arising from his past; - that he chose neither near-fatal illness nor transmuting fall; that, in point of fact, he fears above all things the altered states in which dreams leak into, and overwhelm, his waking self, making him that angelic Gibreel he has no desire to be; - so that his is still a self which, for our present purposes, we may describe as ‘true’...whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of *selected* discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, ‘false’? And might we then not go on to say that it is this falsity of self that makes possible in Chamcha a worse and deeper falsity – call this ‘evil’ – and that this is the truth, the door, that was opened in him by his fall? – While Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered ‘good’ by virtue of *wishing to remain*, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man. (427)

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<sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’ in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-48 (p. 142).

The narrator appears as a character in the novel at a number of moments such as this, losing an omniscient, author-godly status and instead interfering in the novel, explicitly meddling with the characters, self-consciously offering opinions, assuming a dialogue with the reader and using rhetorical questions as a crude example of the persuasive techniques that a god-like narrator must employ more furtively to influence the reader. The conclusions that the narrator arrives at in the above extract imitate what a reader would probably have come to assume anyway, meaning that the narrator's intervention must serve another purpose. Indeed, immediately following this extract, we find the following: 'this sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy? – Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogenous, non-hybrid, "pure", - an utterly fantastic notion! – cannot, must not, suffice' (427). There is then an alternative explanation of the binary, and then another.

The metafictional nature of the novel and the unreliability of the narrator draw the reader's attention to the artificial nature of the novel's many binary oppositions, which are deconstructed and reconstructed only to be pulled apart again in such a way that the reader is forced to acknowledge the dialectic nature of the doubles and the assumptions necessary in creating hierarchies, without ever being able to pin them down to a single all-encompassing explanation. Like the novel as a whole, closure is frequently alluded to, but always deferred and never satisfyingly accomplished. Meaning becomes arbitrary and subjective, a matter of personal taste, as is made clear from the start: '[o]f what type – angelic, satanic – was Farishta's song? Who am I? Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes?' (10).

The ultimate binary opposition – that of good and evil, implicit in the assumption of hierarchy in all binary oppositions – is so consistently thrown into confusion over the course of the novel that readers have no choice but to remove themselves from that dualistic mindset and be content with ambiguities and uncertainties. Maria Beville argues that ‘the dominant presence of the mephistophelian narrator might be considered as a required element in the identity of the novel itself.’<sup>43</sup> This has repercussions for the reader, who must also ‘terrifying[ly]’ become ‘good and evil, angel and demon, much like the tragic central characters Gibreel and Saladin.’<sup>44</sup> However, I would argue that the presence of the untrustworthy narrator has even greater ramifications and by the end of the novel a distinct distrust in the narrator forces readers to reject his authority entirely in order to make sense of the events.

The connection between the ‘mephistophelian narrator’ and Rushdie the author is also foregrounded in the novel. When Gibreel envisions the ‘Supreme Being’ it is ‘not abstract in the least’:

He saw, sitting on the bed, a man about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to the line of the jaw. What struck him most was the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. (318)

This description neatly coincides with the appearance of the author himself at the time and in doing so deflates the power of the author-as-symbol. The narrator/God of *The Satanic Verses* is described in all-too-human terms, with alopecia, dandruff and myopia. In case any readers miss the self-referentiality of the above quotation, the narrator later interjects: ‘[d]on’t think I haven’t wanted to butt in; I have, plenty of

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<sup>43</sup> Maria Beville, *Gothic Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 134.

<sup>44</sup> Beville, p. 134.

times. And once, it's true, I did. I sat on Alleluia Cone's bed and spoke to the superstar, Gibreel' (409). The narrator is thereby revealed as a trickster, having the power to intervene even if he pretends not to.

When writing on a similar instance in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, in which Auster appears as both character and narrator, John Zilcosky argues that 'Paul Auster quite literally rejects theory's imperative to die or disperse: he appears, conspicuously, throughout his novels,' which is an accusation that could be equally levelled at Rushdie.<sup>45</sup> However, his appearance throughout the novel figures Rushdie as a character that not only narrates *but is also narrated by* the text, he is just another character in a fiction.<sup>46</sup> This produces something akin to autobiographical metafiction, as it illustrates the fictionalised status of the author, and suggests that the way we tell stories about ourselves should be subject to the same interpretation and scrutiny that we would give to any other work of fiction. It is not to deny that there is an author there, but to deconstruct the omniscient, infallible ideal of the author. The figure described above is an average guy and as such the author-figure is dethroned and democratised, brought down to the same fictionalised level as other characters in the book. Rather than endowing reality with a magical status – which Rushdie cites as justification for the metafictional style – he is in fact removing the absolute from the world, democratising authorship, and thus by implication bringing the ultimate absolute, God (or more specifically Allah), down to earth, to a democratic and human level.

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<sup>45</sup> John Zilcosky, 'The Revenge of the Author: Paul Auster's Challenge to Theory', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 39 (1998), 195-206 (p. 197).

<sup>46</sup> Ironically, Rushdie did not know at this point the extent to which his life would be narrated by his text. His recent memoir outlines how the 'Rushdie Affair' forced him to retreat into fiction and become the fictional Joseph Anton (Joe for short).

The novel's metafictional approach to religious scripture is one reason for the many criticisms that have been launched against the novel, as the style conflicts with the common interpretation that the *Qur'an* is the direct word of God. Rushdie is forced to dethrone the book's divinely-ordained authority *in order* to make space to challenge it. However, John Erickson exposes the dilemma that Rushdie is faced with in attempting to write on the subject of the satanic verses.<sup>47</sup> 'As magisterial discourses,' Erickson argues, 'religious scriptures rely on a strictly defined "region of discourse" making them immune to outside discourses.' This effectively means that there is no way of challenging religious discourse; 'that is, the satanic verses may indeed survive but solely as an outside, unreliable, institutionalized variant, whose terms of opposition are set by the discourse of Islam.'<sup>48</sup> It is because of this distinction between modes of discourse that it remains an impossible task to critique the verses on their own terms. Metafiction denies absolute authority by exposing the processes of fiction, and as such, in metafictional writing the author/God is always already dead, or disempowered to the point of being worthy of such a status. The two different world-views evoked by (firstly) the Word as divine truth and (secondly) metafiction, start from mutually exclusive premises meaning that it is impossible for them to launch significant critiques of each other.<sup>49</sup>

Ironically, the absence of a similarly metafictional writing style is a reason that many of Kureishi's critics have been shocked and/or confused. For example, in an essay comparing Rushdie's novel with Kureishi's, Frederic M. Holmes suggests that '[t]he

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<sup>47</sup> In less Orientalist terms, these are also known as the *gharaniq*, or 'birds' verses.

<sup>48</sup> John Erickson, *Islam and Postcolonial Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 142.

<sup>49</sup> For further discussion on the question of secularism and critique – largely revolving around the Danish cartoon affair of 2005 – that I did not have space to satisfyingly cover in this thesis, see Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

absence from *The Black Album* of such fictional self-scrutiny regarding the authority of its own representations is a curious blind spot in an otherwise postmodernist novel.<sup>50</sup> However, I would argue that rather than an omission on Kureishi's part, the lack of 'fictional self-scrutiny' (or metafiction) actually intimates a desire for authority that is reflected in the protagonist's search for a structuring authority and source of identity in the novel. Here is where the tone of *The Black Album* differs from that of *The Satanic Verses*, as a shift is made from playfulness to an earnest search for identity and belonging.

Kureishi's novel traces the story of Shahid as he moves from his parents' house in the suburbs into central London and begins college. As he tries to make friends in his new surroundings, he is caught between Riaz and his group of Muslim 'brothers' and his lecturer, Deedee Osgood, who lives and preaches a life of freedom, hedonism and pop-cultural *mélange*. The novel operates around a binary whereby these lifestyles are mutually exclusive and Shahid – caught in the middle (at times physically as well as figuratively) – must decide where he wants to locate his own sense of identity. The physical trauma that he feels as a result of these warring selves is expressed as the numbing sensation of being lost in 'a room of broken mirrors, with jagged reflections backing into eternity' (147).<sup>51</sup>

Feroza Jussawalla and Mark Stein number amongst critics who have highlighted the interdependence of national and personal coming-of-age in the postcolonial

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<sup>50</sup> Frederic M. Holmes, 'The Postcolonial Subject Divided between East and West: Kureishi's *The Black Album* as an Intertext of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, 37.3 (2001), 296-313 (p. 310).

<sup>51</sup> This section has parallels with Jacques Lacan's postulated mirror stage. See further Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience' in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1985), pp. 1-8.

Bildungsroman.<sup>52</sup> For Stein '[t]he black British novel of transformation' – or Bildungsroman – 'has a dual function: it is about the formation of the protagonists as well as the transformation of British society and cultural institutions.'<sup>53</sup> But for Jussawalla, the postcolonial Bildungsroman also has an ideological function, as protagonists inevitably refuse a hybrid identity. Jussawalla denies the common equation of postcoloniality and postmodernity 'as a hybrid flux and merging, or the problematizing of cultures at various interstices,' arguing instead that 'postcoloniality constitutes a rejection of hybridity and a turn toward nationhood.' In support of this, Jussawalla notes as a common trait that the 'postcolonial hero/heroine/protagonist seems to refuse to inhabit a "border" liminal space and finds such a space uncomfortable.'<sup>54</sup> The Bildungsroman is a quest for identity, to find an authoritative meaning in the protagonist's life, and as Stein and Jussawalla have both recognised, it also serves to comment on society. But it is the additional concern for refusing hybrid identities identified by Jussawalla that is the key conceptual turning point for all of the novels that I analyse in this chapter, with the exception of Rushdie's.

This resistance to a hybridising identity is especially pertinent to a consideration of *The Black Album*, in which the protagonist, Shahid, struggles to find an identity by negotiating two ideologies offered in the novel: secular liberalism and Islam, or (to put it blandly as the blurb does) liberalism and fundamentalism. In the binary created and perpetuated by the novel, the former ideology is always destined to win out, as is suggested by the name of Shahid's postmodernist lecturer, Deedee Osgood, or,

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<sup>52</sup> Feroza Jussawalla, 'Kim, Huck and Naipaul: Using the Postcolonial Bildungsroman to (Re)define Postcoloniality', *Links and Letters*, 4 (1997), 25-38; Stein. Also notable is Fredric Jameson's infamous contribution to the debate in 'Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism (1986)' in *The Jameson Reader*, ed. by Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 315-49.

<sup>53</sup> Stein, p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> Jussawalla, p. 35.

without much stretch of the imagination, D. Osgood: do is good. Deedee's 'Dos' (encouraging him to partake in new experiences, be they gastronomic, hallucinogenic or sexual) rival his religious friends' 'dont's' (partaking in sexual activities, being friendly with white women or taking mind-altering substances). Kureishi's protagonist superficially adopts the lifestyle of his lecturer, sharing with her a love of popular culture and hedonist 'anything-goes' ideals and ultimately choosing to leave with her at the end of the novel. The 'horizon of expectations' created by the Bildungsroman genre accordingly suggests that Shahid has come to an understanding of himself according to the dictates of postmodernism.<sup>55</sup>

However, the tone and style of the narrative go against the plot and instead provide a critique of postmodernism as a way of life that Shahid attempts to embrace. If *The Satanic Verses* challenges the authority of the absolute, *The Black Album* challenges the authority of postmodernism to provide a satisfactory explanation of things, in part through intertextual references to Rushdie's novel. Many of Shahid's personal dilemmas play out through the furore that arises following the publication and subsequent burning of a book that is disrespectful of Islam – Rushdie's novel is clearly indicated/implicated. As Maria Degabrielle suggests:

[E]ach novel [*The Black Album* and *The Satanic Verses*] discloses its source of inspiration (a previous text that has become canonical in its own genre) and then goes on to undo the conventions by which the previous text is recognised.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Jauss, p. 131.

<sup>56</sup> Maria Degabrielle, 'Prince of Darkness Meets Priestess of Porn: Sexual and Political Identities in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*', *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, 2 (May 1999) <<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue2/Kureishi.html>> [accessed 3 August 2010] (para. 8 of 29).

Whereas Rushdie draws on the *Qur'an* in order to interrogate the way that scripture is read, Kureishi engages with *The Satanic Verses* in order to question the postmodernist hybridity that Rushdie both uses as a literary style and advocates as a way of life for his characters. To facilitate a challenge to the postmodern hybridity that Rushdie advocates, Kureishi's novel also engages with postmodern concerns, but follows them through to their logical conclusions. He does this via Shahid's ontological questioning, ontology being the 'dominant of postcolonial fiction' according to Brian McHale's definition.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout *The Black Album*, Shahid demonstrates his desire to find a fitting identity (or way of being) for himself, acknowledging that 'he would have to study, read more and think, combining facts and arguments in ways that fitted the world as he saw it' (99). Yet despite the scholarly interest that he determines to act upon, the novel sees the protagonist embarking on different excursions and activities with his rival groups of friends, 'swung here and there by desire' and, we might add, by the intervening repression of desire (97). Despite the eschewal of authority embraced by his chosen mentor, Deedee, Shahid's *desire* for authority is nevertheless indicated in the willingness that he shows to submit to others, whether religiously, by taking orders from Riaz, or sexually in the role-playing and cross-dressing that he enacts with Deedee. Holmes notes the parallel in the narrative between Shahid dressing up as a woman and Shahid 'dressing up' as a Muslim, when he accepts the gift of a *salwar kamiz* from Chad and tries it on for size, citing them as comparable 'ludic experiments with identity.'<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Holmes, p. 306.

This understanding of identity, as something with little more permanence or substance than an outfit to be put on and taken off, comes to define Shahid's personal ideology. After a quest for identity that spans the novel, Shahid eventually decides: '[t]here was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity' (274). This quotation suggests the celebration of a hybrid, impermanent, postmodernist sense of self, yet when taken in parallel with a quotation cited earlier that similarly considers multiple ways of being, some of the phrases begin to jar. Whereas now the language is full of hope, suggesting a world of future opportunities and promise, the earlier passage examined the same sentiments from a more dystopian perspective, employing language of brokenness and war as he had the sensation of being lost 'in a room of broken mirrors, with jagged reflections backing into eternity' (147). Shahid still sees himself pulled in different directions; he still feels that his self is not whole, but melted, or jagged. However, this time he chooses to embrace a way of being that rejects authority, grand narratives and a stable notion of self, which would conclude the Bildungsroman format adequately if readers did not have such a recent memory of the upset that this ontology previously caused him.

Ultimately, for Shahid, authority and individual identity comes from his own writing practice. This is interesting when taken alongside McHale's reminder that – like the Renaissance or Romanticism – 'postmodernism, the thing, does not exist' but is rather a 'literary-historical fiction [...] constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians.'<sup>59</sup> The problem in the narrative

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<sup>59</sup> McHale, p. 4.

similarly arises from the conflation of postmodernism as a way of understanding or constructing art and literature, and the ideal of a postmodernism that can be lived out, ‘out there’ in the real world.

Shahid is content when he is writing, creating and constructing a distinctive poetic identity fictionally, rather than ‘out there.’ Mimicking *The Satanic Verses* (which itself imitates the revelation of *Qur’anic* scripture), Shahid begins to meddle with Riaz’s work that he has been entrusted to type up. Degabrielle argues that Shahid’s tampering with Riaz’s work ‘parodies’ the revelation of the ‘satanic’ verses in Rushdie’s novel. ‘The authority of Islam’ – according to Degabrielle – ‘depends on the authority of “the book,” the Qur’an, the sacred verses, and the Prophet.’ Therefore, Shahid’s ‘tampering’ can be understood as ‘a transgression against the author as a god-like figure.’<sup>60</sup> Through the parallels that Degabrielle identifies between this section and the comparable part of Rushdie’s novel, it becomes apparent that Shahid uses this opportunity to assert his own authority. Becoming the author of his own life – ‘[h]e wanted to crawl back to his room, slam the door and sit down with a pen; that was how he would reclaim himself’ (227) – Shahid effectively becomes a postmodern god, pretending and denying authority through his experiments with literature.

Yet this is a very limited vision that does not allow for any communal identification. The novel closes with Shahid and Deedee agreeing to stay together ‘until it stops being fun,’ a hedonist motto if ever there was one (276). The life that Shahid has spent trying to invest with meaning is now devoid or emptied of the same as he

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<sup>60</sup> Degabrielle, para. 25 of 29.

realises ‘[h]e didn’t have to think about anything’ (276). As Degabrielle suggests, ‘[t]hroughout the novel Shahid looks for a sense of cultural belonging, to ultimately find that he belongs with pop culture where fragmentation, change, undecidability are the norm.’<sup>61</sup> But according to this logic, postmodernism becomes another grand narrative, with another set of norms, which must be fully believed in to confer identity upon its subjects. I therefore agree with Holmes’s conclusion, that ‘[i]n the end, Shahid chooses Deedee over Riaz, but the ephemerality and indefiniteness of what she stands for as a postmodernist seems to undercut the value of his choice.’<sup>62</sup> Whilst Rushdie challenges the Absolute through his style of writing, Kureishi takes Rushdie’s novel as his intertext and questions the (sad) implications of postmodernism as a source of identity, as the protagonist is left alone in the world with only the love of a woman many years his senior to rely on for stability.<sup>63</sup> In the fragmented, hedonistic and solipsistic postmodern lifestyle chosen by Shahid in the end, there is no hope of the communal identification that he has craved throughout the foregoing narrative.

### ***‘To be born again, first you have to die’*: Painful conversion narratives**

A key concern of *The Satanic Verses*, as I discussed earlier, is how newness comes into the world. One of the answers suggested by the text is that of rebirth, summoning images of new life and fresh beginnings. Renaldo J. Maduro and Joseph B. Wheelright explain the Jungian ‘archetypal situation’ of rebirth as

[T]he birth of the ego, or part of the ego, which renews the sense of self (feeling centred and whole). Ego-consciousness is reborn, experiences growth, is expanded; it emerges dynamically from a state of projective identification or

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<sup>61</sup> Degabrielle, para. 29 of 29.

<sup>62</sup> Holmes, p. 308.

<sup>63</sup> Conversely, in other works Kureishi often figures love as the great uniter against selfish individualism or in the face of struggle. An example of this can be found in the film *My Beautiful Laundrette*, dir. by Stephen Frears (Film4, 1985).

fusion with a primordial state of unconsciousness (non-ego). This healthy process in later life repeats the earliest separation of the ego from identification and containment in the primary self. The ego feels threatened by death and experiences (perceives) rebirth.<sup>64</sup>

Rebirth is figured here in psychologically liberating terms, as flight from the threat of death and a return to a younger innocence. Similarly, Hindu, Jain and Buddhist beliefs advocate rebirth or reincarnation, whilst converted or practising Christians describe themselves as born-again to indicate a spiritual (re-)awakening and share with Muslim doctrines a belief in the concept of an ultimate resurrection, using a physical process to symbolise a spiritual one.

By contrast, Rushdie's novel and the more recent texts under examination here strip the process of rebirth of its idealistic psychological and spiritual promise, instead associating it with pain and physical and emotional trauma. My section title, taken from *The Satanic Verses*, states that 'to be born again, first you have to die' (84). In accordance with this dictum the novels I analyse here re-evaluate the concept of rebirth, foregrounding the aspect of death and painful effacement of an old self that is necessary for the (re)generation of a new self.

The maternal tropes figured in the following discussion provide a contrast to earlier sections that revolved around predominantly patriarchal tropes of fatherhood, authorship and God. As Elleke Boehmer points out, 'nation [is] informed throughout by its gendered history, by the normative masculinities and femininities that have

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<sup>64</sup> Renaldo J. Maduro and Joseph B. Wheelright, 'Archetype and Archetypal Image', in *Jungian Literary Criticism*, ed. by Richard P. Sugg (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992), pp. 181-86 (p. 184).

shaped its growth over time.’<sup>65</sup> Indeed, typically ‘feminine’ tropes can be found in my chosen texts, illustrating Boehmer’s argument that in narratives of postcolonial nationhood women have traditionally embodied the role of mother, a position that ‘invites connotations of origins – birth, hearth, home, roots, the umbilical cord – and rests upon the frequent, and some might say “natural”, identification of the mother with the beloved earth, the national territory and the first-spoken language, the national tongue.’<sup>66</sup> This section will cover similar critical terrain in its analysis of traditionally feminine tropes associated with motherhood. However, I will deromanticise these tropes by focussing on their elision with narratives of trauma, guilt and pain in both its physical and spiritual manifestations. I focus here on Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus* and Aboulela’s *The Translator*.

Aboulela’s novel, *The Translator*, tells the tale of Sammar, a young Sudanese widow who has moved to Britain with her husband and borne him a child, only for the former to be killed in a car accident. Having unsentimentally deposited her child with her mother-in-law back in Sudan, Sammar returns to Scotland to work as an Anglo-Arabic translator in Aberdeen University and subsequently finds herself falling for Rae, an academic working in Middle Eastern Studies. In the novel, birth is reduced to an adamantly physical process as elements of romance and sentiment are denied or forcibly repressed. For Sammar, the process of birth is always haunted by (another) death; a year after her first son is born, she miscarries and later recalls, ‘[s]he remembered Tarig [her husband] being calm, warm and sure of what to do. She remembered him on his hands and knees mopping the bathroom floor, her womb that

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<sup>65</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Boehmer, p. 27.

had fallen apart.’<sup>67</sup> The image of the failing womb symbolically brings life and death into uncomfortable proximity, reminding the reader of the interdependence of the two states of being.<sup>68</sup> This is further reflected when Sammar’s husband dies and she displaces her feelings of anger and injustice onto her son: ‘[s]he was unable to mother the child. The part of her that did the mothering had disappeared. Froth, ugly froth. She had said to her son, “I wish it was you instead. I hate you. I hate you”’ (7). The desire for her living son and dead husband to change places illustrates the less hopeful aspect of rebirth; for her husband to be born again would be dependent upon the sacrifice of her child, as one would replace the other. This problematises birth and childhood as romanticised and mythic times; rather than ‘[t]railing clouds of glory [...] from God’ as the infant subject of Wordsworth’s poem does, her children are described in more physically abject terms, engendering postnatal depression and guilt rather than symbolising hope.<sup>69</sup> Any links between birth and greater ideals (of God, in this instance) are cruelly severed. This brutal severing jars with the religious sentiments expressed by the main character throughout the rest of the novel – and I must clarify that Sammar is ultimately reconciled with her son – yet the focus on the painful process that Sammar endures first is given more space and depth of feeling in the novel than the later reconciliation.

Aboulela’s narrative also offers a subversive critique of traditional ways of imagining the nation. Boehmer explains the marginalising effect that romanticising mother-figures has had on women: ‘[o]ften set in relation to the figure of her nationalist son,’

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<sup>67</sup> Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2008), p. 12. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>68</sup> See further Kaukab in *Maps for Lost Lovers*, discussed in Chapter Two, subsection ‘Transgressed Borders/Object Bodies.’

<sup>69</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’, in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Norton, 2005), pp. 796-801.

the woman's 'ample, childbearing, fully *representative* maternal form typically takes on the status of *metaphor*.' This, she states, has the detrimental effect of positioning the woman 'outside the central script of national self-emergence,' the 'central script' being reserved for her 'national sons.'<sup>70</sup> Aboulela's protagonist serves as a corrective to the imbalance created by women so frequently being idealised in nationalist metaphors. The author employs tropes traditionally associated with feminine aspects of nationalism (birth, origins, the umbilical cord), but through a process of re-familiarisation with the physical and emotional traumas involved in birth, she reinserts Sammar as the central player in her narrative. This also enables her to examine processes of self-emergence, questioning whether national identification is the most useful starting point. I will examine Aboulela's move away from national identification further in the next section.

Rebirth is integral to the Bildungsroman genre as characters explicitly undergo processes of self-discovery that often involve the shedding of a former self. In Yassin-Kassab's novel, Sami's Uncle is beaten up, forced into prison and tortured after being found out to be a Muslim Brother by the *mukhabarat*; as he is forced through the prison entrance he looks up and sees an ominous sign above the prison door: '[w]ho enters here is lost; who leaves is born again' (6). Whilst he is in the prison he is therefore addressed as 'Mr. Nobody' (7). This deliberate effacement of identity is a cruel example of what happens when anyone is 'born again,' a motif of pain and self-estrangement that Yassin-Kassab draws on throughout the novel, even when the change is self-motivated or ultimately brings happiness.

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<sup>70</sup> Boehmer, p. 29.

Sami himself goes through a prolonged process of conversion, which he fights violently until the end, and when it finally happens it is figured as a loss and a shattering of self rather than a glorious victory. Sami begins by looking to other places for meaning: he ‘worried about religion, about being religious. No, he needed another identity’ (60). As an alternative to ‘being religious’ he instead tries a trip to his parents’ Syrian homeland, a stint as an academic, and dabbles in mind-altering drugs. Until the point of estrangement from his wife he is aggressively hostile towards her decision to adopt the *hijab*, mocking and refusing to understand a religion that he aligns with ‘childishness’ and/or ‘senility,’ especially when amongst the ‘healthy, [...] sane’ people of London (60).

Admittedly, Sami does eventually come to develop a ‘faith,’ yet the process of conversion that he undergoes before reaching this point (and which the novel is largely concerned with) is figured in the language of trauma and self-destruction. In a haunting moment it is suggested that religion even takes the place of ‘Sami,’ rendering him an automaton after his conversion: ‘[p]asts should die before you, but this past, this religion, cast itself as child rather than parent. It stood at the foot of his bed and watched him disappear’ (169). Religion arrives like a twisted and child-like grim reaper, poised at Sami’s deathbed and awaiting his demise in this uncanny image of rebirth that demands the death of the former sinning self in order to let the new life begin. Subsequently, Sami articulates his first prayer, but this moment is also accompanied by images of splitting, fragmentation and displacement. He:

Notices here that he’s broken into two separate pieces: the piece that advises the other piece to relax. The two pieces in fact not two selves but two

functions of the words. Speaker and speakee. The order to relax has made him briefly disappear. (330)

Though the process of Sami's conversion figures him as variously dead, fragmented and displaced, there is (tenuous) hope to be found at the novel's denouement where he has 'developed a trembling, contingent faith' (348). However, the narrative questions 'what is he, now?' and concludes '[n]ot much any more. Not Mustafa's son, nor Marwan's son-in-law. Not the child of corpse dust. Not an academic. Not a member of the eternal Arab nation' (348). His new faith-based identity is overshadowed by images of negation. Whilst the ending does instil a feeling of hope and newness and a sense of Sami's unburdening as he comes to a reconciliation with his wife and family, the imagery that surrounds the process illustrates the pain of conversion and of being 'reborn' to a new idea. Furthermore, the description of his new-found faith as trembling and contingent – suggesting that it is transitory, or dependent – questions whether or not he has ultimately found the 'new identity' that he had been seeking.

The image of conversion is paralleled with translation in Aboulela's *The Translator*, as the act of 'converting' words into another language highlights the difficulties in moving from one identity to another and the loss that can be incurred through the metaphor of language. Sammar is said to '[work] hard pushing Arabic into English, English into Arabic' (152): the verb suggests a physical labour to the task (reminiscent of the act of labour itself). When she wants to write a letter to Rae she is compelled to write twice: '[s]he had an airmail letter pad with her, a ball-point pen, two envelopes. She was going to write two letters in two languages. They would say the same thing but not be a translation' (184). This illustrates the difficulty of the conversion of

language, as it can prove a struggle, or an ideological challenge, to liberate words from their parent cultures.

Yet translation is not figured as a fruitless act. On the contrary, Wail S. Hassan makes the connection between acts of translation and compromise: '[t]ranslation [...] has two components: linguistic transfer, which is the subject of frequent and open reflection by the characters, and the cultural mediation between disparate political discourses and ideological worldviews, which is often the more complicated part.' Hassan goes on to suggest that it is the negotiation of the 'relationship between translation and conversion that defines the novel's ideological project.'<sup>71</sup> Though translation – of words, cultures, bodies – is shown to be a difficult task, the results are fruitful, with marriage and conversion satisfying the generic conventions of the romantic and the religious strains of the novel. In an attempt to move beyond the pain of these (religious/nationalist) conversion narratives, it is the 'transnational' status of Aboulela's novels that I want to pick up on in the following section.

### **'I guess being a Muslim is my identity'**

One could argue that finding a single or primary point of identification is an unnecessary or even dangerous task. Sen argues in this vein that there should be multiple points of identification to avoid risking the violence of 'a fostered sense of identity with one group of people [that] can be made into a powerful weapon to brutalize another.'<sup>72</sup> For Sen, '[a] proper understanding of the world of plural identities requires clarity of thinking about the recognition of our multiple

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<sup>71</sup> Wail S. Hassan, 'Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 41.2 (Spring-Summer 2008), 298-319 (pp. 304-05).

<sup>72</sup> Sen, p. xv.

commitments and affiliations [...]. Decolonization of the mind demands a firm departure from the temptation of solitary identities and priorities.<sup>73</sup> Yet it is notable that whilst advocating multicultural or plural identities, Sen nevertheless uses the loaded term ‘decolonisation,’ employing the discourse of colonialism and thereby suggesting that a ‘unifocal’ mindset is another hangover from the colonial period. Aboulela’s oeuvre, however, reworks the postcolonial British Bildungsroman by dislocating itself from colonialism, or even migration, as a dominant discourse, thereby largely removing characters from narratives of national displacement. Instead, Aboulela centres her characters predominantly around religious (Muslim) affiliations. As Hassan succinctly puts it:

The novelty of this brand of Anglophone fiction is that it moves away from the reactive position of ‘writing back,’ which has so far served as the primary paradigm of postcolonial fiction. [...] Aboulela is less concerned with reversing, rewriting or answering back to colonial discourse than with attempting an epistemological break with it.<sup>74</sup>

Aboulela instead recentres identity around Muslim faith, taking her Bildungsromane out of East/West, colonial/postcolonial, centre/margin binaries. She gives her characters a new stable and rooted mode of being whilst challenging Orientalist stereotypes (I will expand on the latter point in the next section). In this vein, Anna Ball asserts that ‘the faith-based rootings of Aboulela’s characters prove generative, producing alternate cartographies that reinscribe and overwrite the official limits of national space, and relocate their inhabitants from the margins to the centre of

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<sup>73</sup> Sen, p. 99.

<sup>74</sup> Hassan, p. 299.

community and belonging.’<sup>75</sup> As such, extra-national cartographies liberate Aboulela’s characters from national ‘limits.’

This may raise questions as to whether I am justified in discussing *The Translator* and *Minaret* under a postcolonial paradigm, as this is not primarily the organising structure within which Aboulela situates her characters. I would argue, however, that this points to an omission in postcolonial theory, which is persistently organised around national rather than religious structures, despite the crucial role that religion played during colonisation and continues to play in the construction and organisation of postcolonial nations. Indeed, the role of religion in the imagining of postcolonial national identities is of paramount importance in an era of ‘new’ racisms (see Introduction, subsection ‘New Racism and Muslim Identities’). Amidst increasing Islamophobia in Britain and abroad, especially in the wake of 9/11 and the 7/7 London bombings, obfuscating the role of religion in the construction of minority identities would seem perverse.<sup>76</sup>

Colonial history is ostensibly relegated to the background of Aboulela’s novels, as is made evident by the nod towards its ‘crumbling’ legacy near the end of *The Translator*:

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<sup>75</sup> Anna Ball, “‘Here is where I am’: rerouting diasporic experience in Leila Aboulela’s recent novels’ in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. by Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 118-27 (p. 125).

<sup>76</sup> Aamir R. Mufti’s call for a ‘secular criticism’ reflects this concern. Secular criticism, Mufti insists, is a form of criticism aimed not at religious belief itself, but ‘at the mutual determinations of the religious and the national, at the unequal division of the field of national experience into domains marked by religious difference.’ Basing his theory on the work of Edward Said and observations about minority identities in postcolonial India, Mufti is anxious about the ‘differently and unequally authorized’ traditions ‘within the nation state.’ Aamir R. Mufti, ‘Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, secular criticism, and the question of minority culture’, in *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 107-37 (pp. 117, 125).

The hotel was built by the British in colonial times. It once glittered and ruled. Now it was a crumbling sleepy place, tolerant of rats and with showers that didn't work. But still the view was as before, something natural brimming over, the last stretch of the Blue Nile before it curved and met with the other river, changed colour and went north. (193-94)

This passage represents an ambivalent attitude towards 'colonial times.' Although the narrator's gaze is framed by the windows of the colonial hotel, implying a (world-) view still partially constructed by a former colonial era, the natural order prevailing outside suggests a contrasting permanence that the colonial construction does not have. Although colonial interventions still have a major part to play in the history and politics of Sudan – a country that has been racked by civil war intermittently since the end of Anglo-Egyptian rule and that was divided only a year ago (July 2011) along ostensibly religious lines to create a largely Arab Muslim North and a predominantly Christian and Animist South – nation-based and political postcolonial concerns are largely sidelined in Aboulela's work. What is prioritised is religion, which has increasingly come to define neo-colonial relations (one only has to think of the role that the West has played in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). For postcolonial theory to remain relevant, it is important that it shifts its parameters in order to challenge neo-colonial interventions and ideologies alongside legacies of the 'crumbling' colonial era.

Religious identity has been brought to the fore in Western media following the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks, in ways that often seek (overtly or covertly) to distinguish between 'us' (secular, Western, good) and 'them' (Muslim, non-Western, threatening). For Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, what we see in the Western media

today ‘is the distortion of particular features of Muslim life and custom, reducing the diversity of Muslims and their existence as individuals to a fixed object – a caricature in fact.’<sup>77</sup> They argue that this ‘distortion’ is brought about through ‘framing structures’ that ‘rather than being descriptive and neutral [...] are defined by questions of belonging, “Otherness,” and “threat.”’<sup>78</sup> This in itself highlights the importance of critically evaluating the representation of religious discourses in literature and the media. The critic Amin Malak goes one step further to highlight why the reintroduction of religion as a postcolonial topic is of paramount importance, arguing that the ‘resistance to engage with religion as a key category pertinent to the debate about contemporary neo-colonial reality’ effectively ‘privilege[es] a secular, Euro-American stance that *seems* to shape the parameters of postcolonial discourses.’<sup>79</sup> As he postulates, excluding religion from postcolonial studies is itself a prejudice of a Euro-American project that should be remedied.

Aboulela’s novel *Minaret* can be read as an example of the prioritisation of religion as a source of identity for her postcolonial, migrant characters. *Minaret* concerns itself with a Sudanese woman named Najwa, exiled as a teenager from her home in Khartoum on account of her father’s corrupt dealings with an usurped government. Daughter of rich parents, her initial arrival in London is smooth, reminiscent of childhood holidays. Her class position produces a particular set of postcolonial possibilities that structure the crisis she undergoes, meaning that when the old regime is overthrown and her father arrested, it is financially viable for her family to uproot to Britain, where she finds a network of friends and relatives to help her. At this stage of the novel she can be considered one of those that Simon Gikandi terms ‘postcolonial

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<sup>77</sup> Morey and Yaqin, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Morey and Yaqin, p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> Malak, p.17.

elites,' who 'are, by virtue of their class, position or education, the major beneficiaries of the project of decolonization.'<sup>80</sup> But after her father is executed, her brother imprisoned and her mother deceased, she finds herself increasingly isolated and uncertain of her status in London society, having been financially compelled to take a job as a maid with a local Muslim family. After many refusals to visit the mosque due to her association of Islam with the lower classes in Sudan, she realises that she has missed the Ramadan fast (an important cultural tradition for her, regardless of religious associations) and castigates herself, ultimately deciding to go along with an acquaintance, Wafaa. Unlike *The Translator*, *Minaret* ultimately eschews the closure of Western 'romance' novels, because Najwa forsakes her love for Tamer, having been paid off by his mother, who believes Najwa to be too old for her son. Nevertheless, the novel has a largely happy ending, with both Najwa and Tamer gaining spiritual fulfilment in the form of Hajj for the former and a degree in Middle East Studies for the latter.

The question of how they choose to identify is explicitly enacted in a conversation between the lovers:

'Do you feel you're Sudanese?' I ask him.

He shrugs. 'My mother is Egyptian. I've lived everywhere except Sudan: in Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you?'

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<sup>80</sup> Simon Gikandi, 'Between roots and routes: Cosmopolitanism and the claims of locality', in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. by Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 22-35 (p. 29).

I talk slowly. 'I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now, like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim.'<sup>81</sup>

National identity can evidently be impermanent, and appears arbitrary when applied to such cosmopolitan migrants. Furthermore, as illustrated by Najwa's last statement 'even while living here in London, I've changed,' identity is independent of resident status. This might appear self-evident, but it is worth consideration in light of the ways that identities are persistently constructed and labelled around place (of residency, ancestry, migration, for example). What the two characters in the novel find is that 'Muslim' is an identity that not only has the power to transcend national borders, but also signifies a communal set of beliefs, something that neither Sudan nor Britain is able to provide them with. The minaret of the title that Najwa uses to locate herself physically and spiritually is an emblem for the protagonist's transnational affiliation. When she asserts that '[w]e never get lost because we can see the minaret of the mosque and head home towards it,' she situates the mosque as her physical and metaphorical anchor, an index of her faith and identity (208).

Against the backdrop of alienation and trauma that defines both Najwa's and Sammar's experiences of migration, Aboulela's novels offer religion as a source of comfort and solace. After the death of her husband, Sammar recalls '[d]ays in which the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers. They were her only challenge, the last touch with normality, without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night' (16). Similarly, an act of worship is depicted as 'all the splinters inside her coming together' (72); through prayer she is able to

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<sup>81</sup> Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 110. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

reach a unified sense of selfhood again. Ball illustrates the significance of this reversal and the challenge that it can offer to postcolonial theorists:

Aboulela's novels conjure diasporic landscapes formed not in the interstices, on the move or in the margins, but born out of the secure boundaries of faith-based community and identity, in which the establishment of roots – those constructs of essence, origin and belonging so often the site of deconstruction – are posited as central to the diasporic experience.<sup>82</sup>

Where postcolonial theory and practice is so often concerned with the *deconstruction* of binaries, Ball notes the *reconstructive* bent of Aboulela's work, whereby identities are built and made whole through religious faith.

### **'A traitor to the West'**

Despite the reconstructive and paradigm-shifting nature of Aboulela's work, she has been criticised for the evasion of politics in her novels (discussed in the next section) and for her representations of the West. Hassan sees the author as homogenising and rejecting Western practices, evidenced in her 'narrowly defined notion of personal freedom that she construes as Western and anti-religious.'<sup>83</sup> He describes her notion of freedom as a 'mixture of wholesale rejection of Western modernity, which means to her little more than secularism and Islamophobia, and nostalgia for an idealized Arab past paradoxically and unreflectively conceived of in Orientalist terms.'<sup>84</sup>

Aboulela does indeed voice a number of generalisations about the West through her characters, but her depiction of it is not as straightforward as Hassan has suggested.

The subtitle of this section is taken from *The Translator*, where Rae explains how

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<sup>82</sup> Anna Ball, p. 118.

<sup>83</sup> Hassan, p. 314.

<sup>84</sup> Hassan, p. 316.

there are “those who would even accuse him of being a traitor just by telling the truth about another culture.” “A traitor to what?” “To the West. You know, the idea that West is best” (22). This illustrates that for the professor, there are still prejudices that he is forced to negotiate, justifying his (at times) controversial work. Yet what it means to be Western is never alternatively articulated, leaving a vacant space to be negotiated and considered. This might be problematic, falling into the trap that Morey and Yaqin have identified, by allowing terms such as “American,” “British,” and “Western” [to] swell to operate as what semiotics would term “floating signifiers”: words that have no single agreed-on definition and therefore can mean whatever their interpreters wish them to mean.’ This is problematic because ‘such distinctions are always highly ideological and never a natural outgrowth or inherent in the dictionary definitions of such words.’ Morey and Yaqin find the open use of these terms problematic *specifically* in comparison with terms like ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim,’ which they see as being ‘narrowed to mean all that is threatening and foreign.’<sup>85</sup> However, to close down the former set of words (American, British, Western) at the same time as opening up the latter words (Islam, Muslim) would simply be to turn the hierarchy on its head. To my mind, what Aboulela’s narratives bring to the forefront are individuals and personal choices that may be inflected by one affiliation or another but also illustrate individual desires: Aboulela deals in people rather than systems.

Najwa’s story entails a move towards the West, physically migrating from Sudan to Britain, but also a move away from the West as a loosely-defined ideology or way of thinking. As a teenager in Khartoum she leads a rich and privileged lifestyle, attending a good college, frequenting discos and dreaming ‘dreams shaped by pop songs and

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<sup>85</sup> Morey and Yaqin, p. 36.

American films' (*Minaret* 35). By contrast, when she moves to the geographical West, she simultaneously descends in class and begins her spiritual conversion to what has previously only been an aspect of her cultural background. Geoffrey Nash asserts that '[o]utwardly, Sammar and Najwa's choices (which are very similar) both involve refusal of the West and (on the surface) eschew a hybridity that would imply compromise with alien values.'<sup>86</sup> Whilst I agree that the characters 'eschew a hybridity,' the 'refusal of the West' is more complex. Rather than a wholesale rejection of the West, the novels engage in a debate with Orientalism, which has produced 'one of [the West's] deepest and most recurring images of the Other.'<sup>87</sup> Said describes '[t]he relationship between Occident and Orient' as one 'of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony.'<sup>88</sup> The effect of this hierarchical doubling means that:

Orientalism can also express the strength of the West and the Orient's weakness – as seen by the West. Such strength and such weakness are as intrinsic to Orientalism as they are to any view that divides the world into large general divisions, entities that coexist in a state of tension produced by what is believed to be radical difference.<sup>89</sup>

Aboulela's novels engage with East/West stereotyping without adopting an 'Occidental' attitude that, as Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit argue, 'is like the worst aspects of its counterpart, Orientalism, which strips its human targets of their humanity.'<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Geoffrey Nash, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 150.

<sup>87</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 45.

<sup>90</sup> Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 10.

Rather, by separating the geographical from the ideological Occident, Aboulela effectively questions a binary that has long been operative on an ideological level. When Nash accuses Aboulela's protagonists of a 'refusal of the West,' it tells us more about Nash's prejudice than of Najwa's. Nash presumably uses the 'West' to signify the richer, more secular and more hedonistic lifestyle she led in Khartoum; he cannot be using the word to describe the geographic West, where Najwa is in the process of establishing a home and lifestyle. If we are not so hasty to make the West signify all that is hedonistic and corrupt, then it becomes apparent that Aboulela's work deftly challenges Orientalism by renegotiating stereotypes based on Western affluence and 'third world' poverty. By divorcing ideologies and attitudes commonly associated with the West from the geographic West (and likewise for the East), Aboulela deconstructs the foundations on which Orientalist stereotypes are built. Similarly, *The Translator's* Sammar only 'refuses' certain aspects of the West: ultimately she marries the Scottish Rae and plans to return to Scotland with him. It therefore has to be questioned at points whether what is at stake is really Aboulela's rejection of the West, or straw-man visions of the West that critics such as Hassan construct, only to provide a platform from which to subsequently pull them apart.

In a more nuanced interpretation of understandings of the West in the novel, Ball points out that Sammar's narrative both incorporates and undermines the conventional Western romance:

She has just received Rae's proposal of marriage, and so is positioned as the heroine within the Western romance tradition; yet this proposal also signals Rae's conversion, reversing the Orientalist tradition whereby the male subject

is the bearer of knowledge and civilization, recasting Rae and Sammar within a diasporic Muslim feminist reversal of the romance tradition.<sup>91</sup>

Some critics have misread this ending as subordinating the Muslim framework of the novel to the Western romance tradition: Tina Steiner, for instance, suggests that ‘the romance plot drives towards a “happy ending” which sits at odds with Aboulela’s politics since it suggests that Sammar needs Rae to convert, that Islam on its own is not enough to provide her with a sense of home.’<sup>92</sup> However, such a reading fails to understand the importance of marriage in Islam, a topic covered in numerous *Hadiths* and *Qur’anic* verses, such as the following: ‘[a]nd one of his signs is that he created pairs for you from amongst yourselves, so that you might find peace in each other, and he puts love and mercy between you.’<sup>93</sup> The compatible aims of the romance genre and Muslim faith are also exemplified in Shelina Zahra Janmohamed’s recent autobiography *Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One* (2009), in which the author recounts the trials and tribulations she experienced in finding her husband in a form that incorporates generic conventions of the romance with an exploration of her Muslim faith.<sup>94</sup>

### **Apolitical Islam**

Another criticism often levelled at Aboulela regards her protagonists’ political apathy. Since the ‘Rushdie Affair,’ ‘British-Muslim’ has been understood as a highly politicised identity category, but for Aboulela’s characters religion is a markedly personal affair, provoking questions of personal faith and responsibility rather than

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<sup>91</sup> Anna Ball, p. 125.

<sup>92</sup> Tina Steiner, ‘Strategic nostalgia, Islam and cultural translation in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* and *Coloured Lights*’, *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 20.2 (2008), 7-25 (p. 22).

<sup>93</sup> *Qur’an* 30.21

<sup>94</sup> Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, *Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One*, (London: Aurum Press, 2009).

ones of political allegiance or polemic. Roy describes such identification as ‘post-Islamist,’ suggesting a re-turn to spirituality as an alternative to the highly politicised ‘Islamism’: ‘[p]ost-Islamism does not go hand in hand with a decline of religion; rather it expresses the crisis of the relationship between religion and politics and between religion and the state.’ This turn, Roy suggests, is also coupled with ‘a reinforcement of “imagined identities”, from religious communities to invented neo-ethnic, or even racial, denominations.’<sup>95</sup> Roy largely situates this religious, apolitical turn in the West, where predominantly Christian or secular governments mean that Islam has less political influence.

The question that concerns me, in terms of the post-Islamist turn that Roy identifies, is how these ‘alternative’ versions of Islam might find expression in contemporary literature. Providing one framework for understanding contemporary literature, Bradley and Tate argue that ‘the contemporary novel – both within and without the UK – may more profitably be described as a kind of “post-atheist fiction.”’ They define this genre as ‘an attempt to move beyond the Manichean clash of religious and secular fundamentalisms epitomized by 9/11 and its aftermath.’<sup>96</sup> The ‘New Atheist Novel,’ they argue, replaces a ‘clash’ of ideologies with a belief in itself: ‘it believes in the secular freedom to tell stories, to imagine worlds and to say anything about anything that it – alone – apparently embodies.’<sup>97</sup> But as they note, there are British authors like ‘Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali and Zadie Smith’ who ‘are now offering more complex and variegated pictures of the multi-cultural, multi-faith world.’<sup>98</sup> Claire Chambers objects to the choice of authors offered in support of this claim,

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<sup>95</sup> Olivier Roy, p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> Bradley and Tate, p. 109.

<sup>97</sup> Bradley and Tate, p. 105.

<sup>98</sup> Bradley and Tate, p. 109.

arguing that ‘Kureishi, Ali and Smith - like McEwan, Amis and Rushdie - are preoccupied with the sensational (and marketable) figure of the Muslim extremist and pay little attention to religious people who have no truck with violence.’ Chambers continues, ‘[n]or do they engage in sufficient depth with the genuine political grievances that drive extremism, or the way in which Anglo-American foreign policy may itself be viewed as a form of terrorism.’<sup>99</sup> The critic instead offers an alternative list of authors, including Aboulela, who are ‘producing more nuanced accounts of religion [sic] doubt and multicultural politics.’<sup>100</sup> It is apparent, therefore, that Aboulela’s novels are paradigm-shifting, moving away from the ‘Manichean clash’ set out above, but in a different way to that proposed by Bradley and Tate.

Aboulela strategically retreats from such politically charged debates and ideologies, instead offering tales of personal faith within small networks. In response to a question regarding the absence of Islamism or extremist characters in her novels, Aboulela replies, ‘I just wanted to highlight the non-political part of the religion. I wasn’t saying that extremism doesn’t exist, but showing other aspects of Islam and demonstrating that many Muslims aren’t interested in politics, and not interested in extremism.’<sup>101</sup> Whilst this deliberate rejection of political elements is frustrating at times (*Minaret*’s plot extends to 2004 and is based around a Muslim community, yet despite an increasing level of Islamophobia experienced by her characters, the novel does not make a single explicit reference to 9/11), it does have the benefit of forcing the reader into a new understanding of identity. Roy notes that ‘Muslim religious

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<sup>99</sup> Claire Chambers, ‘Religion and the Lions of Literature’, *Times Higher Education* <<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=410565&sectioncode=26>> [accessed 10.06.10] (para.4 of 8).

<sup>100</sup> Chambers, ‘Religion’, para. 5 of 8.

<sup>101</sup> Claire Chambers, ‘An Interview with Leila Aboulela’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 3.1 (2009) <<http://cww.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/1/86.extract>> [accessed 21 February 2011], 86-102 (p. 100).

sentiment is seeking, beyond or beneath politics, autonomous spaces and means of expression, feeding contradictory and burgeoning forms of religiosity, from a call for wider implementation of *sharia* to the revival of Sufism.<sup>102</sup> Aboulela's work not only renegotiates nationalist affiliations, deprioritising them in favour of religious ones, it also opens up the space of religion, removing it from the highly publicised political sphere that Manichean binaries – such as liberalism versus extremism, or Western democracy versus Islamism – are constructed around, and centring instead on religious individuals and small faith networks.

Aboulela's *Najwa* repeatedly rejects the political, or chooses to ignore or repress its significance, much to the frustration of her revolutionary boyfriend, Anwar. For Sadia Abbas, the novel's 'fantasy reconciliation between Islam and the West is achieved at the expense of the secular Sudanese, in this case working class, radical.'<sup>103</sup> The reconciliation between the portrayal of female Muslim protagonist and imperialist desires, Abbas asserts, is similarly put down to portraying 'reasonably deft visions of Muslim women who desire their own subordination, thus making resistance to imperial dreams of female rescue simpler, more clean.'<sup>104</sup> Abbas's critique suggests that politics are sidestepped in Aboulela's novels in order to render the books more marketable to a Western consuming audience.

Though Aboulela does seem to duck out of explicit political questions, Abbas's critique verges on a deliberate misreading of the novel and a simplification of the plights of the various characters. In searching for the political polemic, it obfuscates

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<sup>102</sup> Olivier Roy, p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> Sadia Abbas, 'Leila Aboulela, Religion and the Challenge of the Novel', *Contemporary Literature*, 52.3 (2011), pp. 430-61 (pp. 436, 437).

<sup>104</sup> Sadia Abbas, p. 445.

the nuances of everyday struggle with faith and community that are presented in the novel. Abbas ignores the unfeeling and obnoxious character that Anwar is shown to be in order to mourn his political sidelining. She chooses to describe Aboulela's characters as 'desiring of subordination' rather than reading the nuances and power shifts that lead up to the happy romantic ending earned by Sammar and Rae, in which the former refuses to sacrifice her faith in order to attain an unbelieving husband.

However, while Abbas's readings of *The Translator* are somewhat blinkered, the conclusions that she arrives at merit consideration. Drawing comparisons with the furore surrounding *The Satanic Verses*, Abbas considers what kind of religious novel would be acceptable. She concludes:

The attributes that allow the novels to be designated as Muslim and *halal* are thoroughly secular, by which I mean that they have little to say about divinity and bracket theological questions and the more troubling effects of religion on the world. In their chaste and narrow romantic focus, they make religion private. Secularism, it turns out, is constitutive of their *halal* goodness.<sup>105</sup>

The parallels between Abbas's description of the 'halal' goodness of Aboulela's literature and Roy's description of post-Islamism are immediately apparent, as both require Islam's removal from the political sphere. For this reason, Aboulela is *necessarily* limited in her version of the religious novel. But while Aboulela's work might not ask theological questions, the call for her to do so by critics like Abbas is to insist on a version of Islam that Aboulela chooses not to engage. Abbas's questioning of what it would take to write a religious novel of the sort that she requires (politically questioning, theologically engaged) is far more convincing than her attempt to

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<sup>105</sup> Sadia Abbas, p. 455.

pigeonhole Aboulela as a failure at a type of novel that it appears she did not set out to write.

Aboulela's novels are paradigm-shifting without being political, by encouraging identification *with* characters frequently positioned as the Other of Western discourse. I share Christina Phillips's opinion that *The Translator* is successful inasmuch as it makes a religious worldview palatable to a largely Western audience: '[a]s narrative filter, Sammar's version of events – her Weltanschauung – is automatically presented as natural, while as protagonist she immediately commands the sympathy of the reader.' The implication of this is that 'the role of the reader is programmed – to be co-opted to the side of Sammar and forced to view the world as she does.' As Phillips suggests: '[g]iven that the novel is written in English, this will largely mean, in practice, the adoption of an Islamic perspective by a non-Muslim reader.'<sup>106</sup> As a counter to the methods of 'framing' that Morey and Yaqin observe in contemporary media, a change in outlook might be exactly the remedy required to combat increasing levels of Islamophobia evident in today's society. The amount of criticism and commentary that has already been published on Aboulela stands as testimony to her importance as a contemporary British author, whilst also indicating a new trend in British literature, as the faith-centred bent of her work points towards a new direction for the British Bildungsroman.

### **Bracing Hybridity**

Ultimately, this calls for a new turn in postcolonial criticism and for new approaches to the British Bildungsroman. Contemporary authors – including Kureishi, Yassin-

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<sup>106</sup> Christina Phillips, 'Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*: Reading Islam in the West', *Wasafiri*, 27.1 (2012), 66-72 (p. 68).

Kassab and Aboulela – critique Bhabha’s utopian concept of hybridity (whether implicitly or more explicitly) as a discomfiting position to occupy, and therefore turn elsewhere for direction. The terrifying absence of a structuring system or belief is expressed in a predilection for the discussion of fathers, authors and gods as symbols of a former age of grand narratives, certainty and trust, or at the very least, authority. In a more gruesome turn of events, narratives of traumatic (re)birth illustrate the pain of ‘newness enter[ing] the world’, highlighting a situation where frequent or dramatic change becomes painful at best, life-threatening at worst. Offering a change of perspective and priority, Aboulela roots her characters in their communities through shared religious faith, giving them an unchanging, transnational sense of identity that can be safely carried across borders. This effectively serves as a challenge to postcolonial critics to take religion seriously and to shift the parameters to include it, questioning postcolonial theories that still revolve solely around national or diasporic concerns. Challenging the Euro-American ‘post-atheist’ world identified by Bradley and Tate, it is necessary to make room for religion once more, as an important feature of both personal and national narratives and as a way of understanding how national affiliation is only one of many ways of identifying. Postcolonial writing in contemporary Britain is therefore at least in part a project of decentring ideas of nationhood as the only – or the primary – source of identification, instead opening up the ‘imagined community’ to multiple sources of affiliation that the authors variously demonstrate do not have to be mutually exclusive.

## Chapter Two

### Gothic England: Another Time, Another Space, Another Other

The Gothic is a useful point of entry when considering national identity, as it brings to the forefront structures of fear that have played a part in shaping the nation.<sup>1</sup> As a non-realist genre, Gothic has a much closer affinity with desire – and its obverse, fear – than its realist counterparts. As such, Gothic novels can act as a psychological barometer for the nation, tracing the repressed desires and paralysing fears that riddle the national subconscious. Postcolonial Gothic reworks the genre in two important ways. Firstly, it challenges its colonial predecessors by addressing damaging constructions of alterity perpetuated in foregoing literature; secondly, it appropriates familiar gothic tropes and applies them to new situations so as to reflect contemporary manifestations of fear and trauma.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter begins by exploring some conventional gothic tropes – namely doubling, abjection and the unspeakable – that have been reworked by postcolonial authors in order to suit a postcolonial society. I then consider a desire *for* trauma as a point of identification that increasingly defines contemporary fiction. I use Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) and Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) as examples of postcolonial Gothic novels that parodically critique stereotypes and fears perpetuated in colonial Gothic and that address contemporary issues surrounding fear, trauma and national identity. Before discussing

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<sup>1</sup> This reflects Raymond Williams' terminology in 'structures of feeling', that emphasises 'a distinction from the more formal concepts of "world-view" or "ideology"' and are 'concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt.' Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> I capitalise the word 'Gothic' when using it as an adjectival noun to describe a body of literature, but place it in lower case when using it simply as an adjective.

the texts I will outline the connections that I make between postcolonialism, Gothic and English identity.

### **Postcolonial Gothic**

In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, Chris Baldick asserts that ‘a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration.’<sup>3</sup> Baldick’s formula has gained currency in Gothic criticism, but its potential application to a postcolonial agenda has not, to date, been explicitly handled. The parallels are, however, apparent. A ‘fearful sense of inheritance in time’ is shared by postcolonial literatures, in which closure on the colonial period is never fully accomplished. This means that history frequently intrudes upon the present in the form of colonial legacies of material, psychological and political traumas for which there have been insufficient reparations. Furthermore, in postcolonial Britain, former distinctions between colonial centre and colonised periphery are to some extent collapsed through the migration of peoples and products that could be seen to engender a ‘claustrophobic enclosure in space.’

Many critics have made links between Gothic, postcolonialism and/or colonialism, citing common tropes to be found in the different bodies of literature.<sup>4</sup> In *Postcolonial Imaginings* (2000), David Punter conceptualises the functions of ‘the literary’ before illustrating postcolonial implications for the purpose of his study.

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Baldick, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, ed. by Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. xi-xxiii (p. xix).

<sup>4</sup> For more on links between Gothic, colonialism and postcolonialism see Andrew Smith and William Hughes (eds.), *Empire and the Gothic: the Politics of Genre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Tabish Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Rudd.

What is interesting is Punter's depiction of 'the literary' in exclusively gothic vocabulary, including 'the uncanny,' 'the haunting and haunted,' 'melancholy' and 'trauma' as defining characteristics.<sup>5</sup> By figuring the literary in this manner Punter hints at the innate gothicness of all texts, but also illustrates why these categories are especially pertinent to postcolonial fictions. The categories that Punter identifies will be central to my own discussion of postcolonial Gothic.

In the thesis introduction I outlined reasons for understanding genre in terms of desire rather than a set of inflexible rules. According to this logic, the novels I focus on could be justly considered Gothic by virtue of sharing a traditionally gothic set of desires: a desire to distinguish Self from Other that seeks to displace monstrosity through processes of abjection and repression, and a related fear of that which is alien or unknowable. However, I realise that Gothic purists might question my selection of texts, perhaps suspecting that they lack the 'complete external form' familiar to the Gothic genre and boast only 'an incomplete repertoire, a selection only of the corresponding kind's features.'<sup>6</sup> I borrow terms that Alistair Fowler uses to distinguish *modes* from their originary *kinds* in order to outline why my chosen texts might be better understood as modally rather than generically Gothic.

However, as I stated from the outset, I am interested in what happens to genres when they are reinvigorated through their collision with postcolonial texts. In the case of Gothic, I would suggest that whilst familiar tropes might be appropriated to alternative ends in my selected texts, thereby changing the overall structure from traditional

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<sup>5</sup> David Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 107.

Gothic, the desires and fears expressed in the novels correspond with their traditional counterparts as outlined above. Whether we choose to figure this as a shift from genre to mode or as a (r)evolution in the genre itself is of less interest than exploring what occurs at the site of intersection with the postcolonial.

### **Gothic England**

This chapter focuses predominantly on Englishness rather than Britishness. I choose to address what is now perceived to be an antiquated and politically defunct national definition for three main reasons that I expand upon below: firstly, the historical relationship of Gothic to Englishness, secondly the category of Englishness as a politically haunting and haunted presence, and finally the instability of definitions of Englishness and Britishness that have been opportunistically employed in order to exclude and Other. Equally, from a practical perspective, the texts that I consider are all English novels and I would not wish to subsume the distinct categories of Scottish or Irish Gothic under a British umbrella.<sup>7</sup>

The desire to preserve or recapture a sense of quintessential ‘Englishness’ has an historical relationship with Gothic. As such, Robert Miles suggests that ‘Englishness, the medieval and the Gothic are virtual synonyms’ and that all are ‘predicated on loss.’ Miles conceptually draws the terms together under the umbrella of nostalgia, which he defines as ‘a recognition of difference (the past as irretrievable) married to an insistence on sameness (the past, we hope, will tell us what we really are).’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Iain Banks’ *The Wasp Factory*, for example, is a Scottish Gothic novel that critiques English imperialism. The novel would therefore sit uncomfortably under a label of ‘British Gothic’ that would subsume important local differences. Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (London: Abacus, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 31.

Nostalgia continues to play a significant part in the construction of national identity, as is apparent in the language that Paul Gilroy uses to explain the function of World War II as ‘that particular mythic moment of national becoming and identity,’ in which the country had a recognisable and suitably ‘evil’ enemy to unite against in the form of Nazi Germany.<sup>9</sup> Locating a sense of national identity in a past that predates acts of decolonisation and the subsequent increase in migration to Britain from former colonies becomes increasingly problematic in contemporary multicultural Britain.

This links to my second reason for foregrounding constructions of Englishness precisely *for* the term’s contemporary political sidelining. Though the imperial mission was politically a British one, cultural and linguistic colonialism was predominantly English in nature, resting upon internalised and transported ideas of ‘Englishness’ that often pre-dated the colonial period. This historical bind has hampered the generation of any new ideals to match present-day multicultural and multiethnic England. The ‘Parekh Report,’ published in 2000, questioned the possibility of reimagining Britain ‘in a multicultural way’<sup>10</sup> and decided that ‘[b]ecause of its association with white supremacy, white privilege, imperialism, and its historical position at the centre of British political and cultural life, [it] rejects Englishness as an appropriate label for the re-imagined multi-ethnic nation.’<sup>11</sup> This suggests that ideas of Englishness are politically redundant in a multicultural, multiethnic society, and that the concept of Englishness itself is politically exiled to the past. This, however, makes Englishness inherently gothic: if England locates (or is even politically *forced* to locate) its identity historically, it becomes the uncannily

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 95.

<sup>10</sup> CFMEB (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain), *The Future of Multiethnic Britain: The Parekh Report* (London: Profile Books, 2000), pp. 36, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Fortier, p. 25.

present absence, spatially here yet temporally removed. When figured like this, present space is irredeemably haunted by the (perverted) memory of what it was, and what it denies or represses.

Finally, I want to consider the way that deliberately instable definitions of Englishness and Britishness have been opportunistically employed. For Ian Baucom:

Its conservators could save Englishness by insisting that the Empire had little or nothing to do with England, by defining imperial space as something subordinate to but quite different to English space, and by identifying the empire's subjects as persons subordinate to but quite different from England's subjects – by identifying these as *British* spaces and *British* subjects: a solution that manages the neat trick of allowing England to simultaneously avow and disavow its empire.<sup>12</sup>

When figured as such, it becomes apparent that the category 'Englishness' has been used to eschew the responsibilities and guilt of empire, but also to elevate the status of the English above other nations of what is now known as the Commonwealth.

### **Transgressed Borders/Abject Bodies**

In this section I discuss novelistic representations of migration, arguing that repeated images of exile, transgression, liminality and abjection serve to gothicise migrant experience. Furthermore, I argue that physical, bodily abjection is frequently made to mirror – or to appear as a symptom of – the transgression of national borders, as national traumas of the colonial past and the neo-imperial present are played out on the human body. Migrants frequently appear as embodiments of paradox in the novels

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<sup>12</sup> Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 6.

I analyse. Aporetically, they occupy the spaces between surface and depth, exile and return, home and not-home, departure and arrival. Indicative of this paradoxical existence, their bodies are frequently figured as ghosts, as they lose their physicality and instead inhabit liminal and indeterminate states.

Baucom provides a compelling reading of the many immigrant families living above the Shandaar Café in *The Satanic Verses*. Defining the scenario in legal terms, he describes a situation whereby migrants ‘live in anticipation of a moment in which their legal identities will catch up with their bodies.’ These ‘wanderers’ are termed ‘the frustrated specters of the migrant uncanny. They are the empire’s repressed, patiently waiting permission to return.’ These migrant families are forced to occupy liminal spaces, transgressing many borders and rendering themselves ghost-like as they subsist in the ultimate liminal space between presence and absence. Baucom also alleges that the migrants are ‘trapped in a journey,’<sup>13</sup> a paradox that cuts between the traditionally distinct strands of masculine and feminine Gothic.<sup>14</sup> Taking the conventional gothic trope of ghostliness, usually synonymous with death, postcolonial Gothic addresses contemporary socio-political circumstances that force people into a living death. A denied legal identity is writ large in migrants’ ethereality.

In Syal’s *Anita and Me*, the protagonist Meena is a second generation immigrant, and has never visited India, the place that her parents call ‘home.’ For her, the problem of exile is different; she is, to all intents and purposes a ‘Tollington wench,’ but her skin

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<sup>13</sup> Baucom, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Ferguson Ellis defines the two strains as follows: ‘In the feminine Gothic the heroine exposes the villain’s usurpation and thus reclaims an enclosed space that should have been a refuge from evil but has become the very opposite, a prison. The masculine Gothic gives the perspective of an exile from the refuge of home, now the special province of women.’ Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1989), p. xiii.

marks her as Other and she becomes the victim of racist abuse. She is doubly exiled: ‘I knew I was a freak of some kind, too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench.’<sup>15</sup> Having no first-hand knowledge of India (instead relying on overheard conversations behind closed doors, or patronising and archaic history lessons), Meena’s sense of Indian identity is superficial and imposed by others. The control exerted over Meena simply by looking at her is significant; when she is audience to a racist speech (‘[t]his is our patch. Not some wogs’ handout’) she feels ‘as if the whole crowd had turned into one huge eyeball which swivelled slowly between me and papa’ (193). This monstrous synecdoche illustrates Meena’s fear of the gaze, which is shown to outweigh any fear of physical aggression.

Meena’s sense of alienation from the way that she looks is played out through the uncomfortable relationship that she has with her own skin. She views her skin as superficial and separate, claiming: ‘I wanted to shed my body like a snake slithering out of its skin and emerge reborn, pink and unrecognisable’ (146). Meena’s story is a coming-of-age narrative (a Bildungsroman with a gothic twist), and in the steps she takes towards self-arrival she must distinguish what is and what is not intrinsic to herself. Unlike the Bildungsromane discussed in Chapter One, in which characters’ ontological choices are played out in the arena of ideology, Meena’s battle for self-definition takes place on her own body. This gives rise to processes of abjection, which Kelly Hurley describes as occurring when ‘the impulse towards self-differentiation overtakes the proto-subject.’ However, because “‘I” and “not-I” have not been (and as yet cannot be) counter-distinguished, this is also,’ for Hurley, ‘an

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<sup>15</sup> Meera Syal, *Anita and Me* (London: Flamingo, 1997), pp. 149-50. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

agonising and convulsive moment of self-repudiation, self-expulsion [...]. One experiences oneself as the vile matter that must be cast off.’<sup>16</sup> There is little that could be considered more abject than the shedding of one’s own skin, and portraying it as a snake’s illustrates the sense of alienation that Meena feels from it.

In *Powers of Horror: Essays on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva famously defines abjection in terms of inassimilable threat.<sup>17</sup> Though many examples of abjection that Kristeva focuses on *are* bodily viscera, she asserts that ‘[i]t is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’<sup>18</sup> Using this definition of abjection, it follows that Meena sees her skin as disturbing her identity. Operating in the boundary between inner and outer, her skin is something that she cannot assimilate into her sense of self and she therefore feels threatened by it. The snake, typically a symbol of deceit, betrays the feelings that Meena has towards her skin, which she can only see as deceptive.

*Maps for Lost Lovers* similarly employs images of physical abjection to symbolise deeper psychological and social traumas linked to the experience of migration. The novel traces the interweaving lives of the families of adulterous Chanda and Jugnu following their murder, presumably (but not explicitly) at the hands of Jugnu’s brothers. Set in an unidentified northern town, the novel follows a sequence of traumatic events in the lives of the two migrant families. Kaukab, Jugnu’s sister-in-

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<sup>16</sup> Kelly Hurley, ‘Abject and Grotesque’, in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 137-46 (p. 144).

<sup>17</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

law, finds herself increasingly isolated in England, through alienation from the English language that her family have embraced. Her description of childbirth reworks what is commonly understood to be the primary site of abjection. She tells her daughter: '[t]hey take the baby out of the mother but not all the way out: a bit of it is forever inside the mother, part of the mother, and she can hear and feel the child as it moves out there in the world.'<sup>19</sup> Rather than indicating repulsion and the desire to separate, this image evokes nostalgia for a time before the separation occurred. As if Kaukab's children need to signify their real separation, her womb (their first home) is described as 'slipping out of her vagina' (260). Lindsey Moore makes the connection between abjection and assimilation to English culture at this point, arguing that '[i]t is no accident, given the partial loss of her children to "Englishness," that Kaukab's womb is graphically falling out.'<sup>20</sup> Moore's reading highlights the novel's tendency to metaphorically displace psychological trauma onto bodily viscera. The novel's real transgressed borders are cultural and linguistic, but these are represented via Kaukab's body as she is unable/ unwilling to assimilate to white English culture in the same way as her family. Kaukab yearns for a moment before separation, symbolising the considerable trauma that the experience of migration has inflicted upon her. Abjection is, after all, figured as a normal stage of social development.<sup>21</sup>

Aslam's novel moves abjection beyond the personal in order to allegorise national traumas. The story of Jugnu's father, Chakor, frequently makes links between personal and political issues. Having lost his memory and subsequently forgotten his

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<sup>19</sup> Nadeem Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 304. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>20</sup> Lindsey Moore, 'British Muslim Identities and Spectres of Terror in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*', *Postcolonial Text*, 5.2 (2009) <<http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1017/946>> [accessed 24 August 2012] 1-19 (p. 10).

<sup>21</sup> For Kristeva, abjection is associated with primal repression and enables the constitution of subject/object boundaries. Kristeva, p. 12.

Hindu identity at the hands of an RAF bomb in Gujranwala, 1919, Chakor is subsequently brought up as a Muslim. This disturbs his family's religious identity for years to come. The description of Chakor's death over fifty years later returns readers to the national traumas that have spilled into his personal life:

On the day in December that Chakor vomited dark-brown half-digested blood, grainy like sand – the aorta had ruptured and spilled its contents into the stomach so that now his body was consuming itself – the Indian army moved into East Pakistan, and Pakistan surrendered after a two-week long war: East Pakistan was now Bangladesh – India had not only defeated Pakistan, it had helped cut it in two. (82)

The abject image of vomit and blood is coupled with the concurrent moment of national abjection, where identity is disturbed as borders are violated. Both traumas are the result of British imperialism, and of the rupturing of ineffectively constructed boundaries. Even the boundary between Chakor and his country is violated, as events render them mutually dependent when Chakor becomes a microcosm for the traumatised nation.

Judith Butler theorises the vulnerable interdependency of the public sphere and the private body, arguing that 'the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well.' For Butler, 'the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own' due to their 'invariably public dimension.' She concludes: '[c]onstituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere my body is and is not mine.'<sup>22</sup> Following Butler's argument, Chakor's body is not merely a

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<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 26.

microcosm for the nation, but always implicated by it, defined by it and a part of it, as scenes of national violence are played out on the stage of the individual body.

Lucy Armitt's description of 'cryptonymy' sheds light on the way that the scene of Chakor's death is narrated by his son, Shamas. 'Cryptonymy,' according to Armitt, 'relates to the psychoanalytic concept of transgenerational haunting' in which families are haunted by 'the gaps left within us by the secrets of others,' rather than the dead themselves. This is a complex haunting, in which:

[T]he precise nature of the trauma only reveals itself in coded form and by a type of ventriloquising process, whereby what we hear from the apparent victim are the phantoms of a trauma belonging to past generations, but filtered through the voices and personae of those present.<sup>23</sup>

It is notable that in the section describing Chakor's death what we hear is not Chakor's struggle, but its ventriloquisation through his son. This indicates that the traumas visited upon previous generations still have a resonance into the present day, implying that the colonial moment is not entirely 'post' but continues to penetrate the present. The revelation of gaps and secrets (in histories and memories) resonates beyond the specifics of this section of the narrative to offer a glimpse into a wider postcolonial concern with recovering history's silenced voices.<sup>24</sup>

Meena (in *Anita and Me*) similarly experiences alienation that can be linked to a residual effect of colonisation, which informs the racist prejudices of those around her and even her own mindset. She frequently blurs boundaries between inner and outer and between fantasy and reality, confessing 'I was terrified that my body would betray

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<sup>23</sup> Lucie Armitt, 'The Magic Realism of the Contemporary Gothic', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 305-16 (p. 312).

<sup>24</sup> I will return to the issue of silencing later in the chapter.

my mind and all the anger and yearning and violent mood swings that plagued me would declare themselves in a rash of facial hives or a limb dropping off in a public space' (57). This quasi-Victorian understanding of physiognomy suggests an interdependence of inner and outer that Meena claims herself 'terrified' of, yet at other points she wishes for her inner and outer 'selves' to match up.

In a state of discontent at seeing how the colour of her skin affects people's actions towards her, Meena writes to a magazine: 'Dear Cathy and Claire, I am brown, although I do not wear thick glasses. Will this stop me from getting a guy?' The reply, treating her skin as a 'problem' to be solved, encourages:

You would be amazed what a little lightly-applied foundation can do! Always smile, a guy does not want to waste his time with a miserable face, whatever the shade! P.S. Michael Jackson seems to do alright, and he's got the *added problem* of uncontrollable hair! Most of all, BE YOURSELF! Love, C&C...  
(145-46, *my emphasis*)

The advice to both 'be yourself' and to mask the skin with foundation is either vastly contradictory, or suggests that being yourself is *only* an inner affectation, making surface signifiers of identity completely irrelevant. Either way, it represents a fractured sense of identity comparable to that described by Patrick Colm Hogan in his analysis of colonised subjects' conflicting 'practical' and 'reflective' identities. He asserts that though '[o]ne's reflective identity as defined by the colonizer is often brutally demeaning [...] the economic and political domination of the colonizers [...] impels one to accept the colonial categories, their implications and practical consequences.' The painful result of this colonial legacy of self-alienation manifests itself in 'very sharp and painful conflicts on one's self-understanding, aspiration,

expectation, action, etc., leaving one almost entirely unable to take coherent action towards humanly fulfilling goals.’<sup>25</sup> This gives an indication as to why, in a so-called ‘post’-colonial period, Meena still cannot help but imbibe the racist prejudices (residue of a colonial mindset) served up by those around her. As her practical and reflective identities do not match up, she constantly feels a sense of alienation and splitting.

The sentiments displayed here are played out in a much more darkly comical manner in *The Satanic Verses*. Waking up in hospital after a spate of police brutality, Saladin realises to his horror that he has transformed into a devilish goat-like creature. He is surrounded by a crowd of similarly absurd beings, including an Indian manticore, Nigerian businessmen with tails and Senegalese snake-men. Questioning why the transformations have occurred, Saladin is answered, ‘[t]hey describe us [...]. That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct’ (168). The magic realism of Rushdie’s novel – a style that Joyce Wexler conceptualises as allowing ‘time and space [to] obey the laws of desire rather than physics’ – means that demeaning descriptions have their full effect.<sup>26</sup> As such, Rushdie suggests that the racist English *desire* immigrants to live up to the stereotypes created about them: they want their descriptions to be true.

The scenario that Rushdie parodies brings to the forefront the image of England’s nightmare Other in order to illustrate both the comical absurdity of the stereotypes created and the damage done to those who are thus objectified. Homi Bhabha’s work

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<sup>25</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity: Crises of Tradition in the Anglophone Literatures of India, Africa and the Caribbean* (Albany: SUNY P, 2000), p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Wexler, p.139.

on stereotypes illuminates this point, as he attests to the importance of ‘fixity in the ideological construction of otherness.’ Bhabha highlights the paradoxical nature of the stereotype, as it ‘vacillates between what is always “in place”, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.’<sup>27</sup> The anxiety to repeat stereotypes and fix them by the literalisation of overblown caricatures in *The Satanic Verses* highlights the real fear that is being repressed: that migrants might not live up to the stereotypes, that they may not be as easily recognised and/or demonised, that they may even change what it means to be English. In order to be safely distinguishable, immigrants must be made to seem so monstrously and fixedly Other as to be safely opposed to the English Self.

### **‘I am the others’: Embodying the Monstrous Other**

Here, I focus on the Other in postcolonial Gothic, in which the narrative reverses traditional Gothic by means of its focalisation through Othered characters. By forcing readers to identify with minority characters, authors enable the deconstruction of a Self/Other binary on which imperial Gothic is frequently built. Bhabha’s analysis of the Lacanian mirror stage highlights some important features of the stereotype that will be pertinent to the discussion. For Bhabha, the image confronting the subject in said mirror stage is ‘simultaneously alienating and hence confrontational,’ attributes that he cites as the ‘basis of the close relation between the two forms of identification complicit with the Imaginary – narcissism and aggressivity.’<sup>28</sup> These two modes of identification are comparable to the stereotype, ‘which, as a form of multiple and contradictory belief, gives knowledge of difference and simultaneously disavows or

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<sup>27</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> See further Lacan, pp. 1-8.

masks it. Like the mirror phase “the fullness” of the stereotype – its image *as* identity – is always threatened by “lack”.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Meena undergoes a different act of misrecognition, as she does not merely falsely recognise herself, metonymically substituting image for identity, but cannot recognise herself at all. Furthermore, she cannot see herself in the modern-day mirrors that she looks to, and fails to find familiar representations in the media or history books, in her family or friends. Her racist, white friend, Anita, becomes her only point of identification. Meena states, ‘sometimes when I looked into her eyes, all I could see and cling to was my own questioning reflection’ (146). This extended act of misrecognition is dangerous, as she sees herself through the eyes of another, judging herself according to Anita’s prejudiced, if not openly hostile, gaze. She cannot see the stereotype objectively.

Frantz Fanon talks of the difference between stereotypes of Jewishness and blackness, as whilst ‘the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness [...] I [Fanon] am overdetermined from without. [...] I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*.’<sup>30</sup> Like Fanon, Meena is ‘overdetermined from without,’ but her second generation immigrant status and lack of knowledge of India leads her to identify as English, and all of the other English people she knows are white. Meena sees her inner identity as English, therefore white, so fails to recognise her image that – according to the ‘image as identity’ metonymy of stereotypes – should also be white. It takes her a while to learn that no matter how hard she tries to ‘fit in,’ those around her will construct her identity in terms of the colour of her skin. She has to

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<sup>29</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 77.

<sup>30</sup> Fanon, p. 82.

learn this before she can overcome her ‘fixed’ sense of identity and reject the supposed superiority implied by the racist gaze.

Due to her inclination to look through Anita’s eyes, Meena is effectively displaced, as is suggested by the title of the novel: rather than using the nominative pronoun, ‘I,’ Syal employs the objective pronoun, ‘Me,’ meaning that Anita is the subject of the novel, and Meena (like the author, Meera) is displaced. This initial displacement sets the tone of the novel, as Meena has to struggle against Anita’s overpowering and consuming sense of self:

I followed Anita around like a shadow for the rest of the afternoon, keeping a respectful distance behind her [...]. I knew if I got too close to her during one of her wordless seething tempers, I would be sucked into it like a speck into a cyclone. Her fury was so powerful it was almost tangible, drew the energy and will from me until the world reversed like a negative and I found myself inside her head, looking out of her eyes and feeling an awful murderous hatred. (186)

Anita is a microcosm for the many white eyes through which Meena must view the world; due to her Indian heritage, Meena notices that she is unrepresented (unseen) in the media, whilst she is also *unseeing*. Viewing the world through adopted eyes, she is blind to the injustices and cruelty inflicted upon her family. Furthermore, Meena’s self-representation as a shadow indicates a debilitating passivity, as all of her actions are dictated by the owner of the shadow. In a statement that reflects Colm Hogan’s definition of practical and reflexive identities, Berthold Schoene-Harwood argues:

Meena’s most intimate narrative casts her as the mere reflection – the shadow – of Anita’s hegemonic self. Evidently, Meena has suffered identification as a

process of doubling and projective mimicry exacerbated by an internal split into colonizing self and far too readily colonized other.<sup>31</sup>

The critical break that Schoene-Harwood makes from Colm Hogan is captured in the phrase ‘far too readily colonized,’ which entails a judgement of Meena and suggests that she colludes in her own oppression. This criticism coincides with the tone of the novel in its resistance to simplifying oppositions between good and evil, victim and perpetrator.

Mirroring is similarly employed in Aslam’s novel in order to illustrate a dangerous tendency to substitute appearance for reality. The opening pages of *Maps for Lost Lovers* introduce readers to a lake that is central to the novel, with many key scenes taking place on its shores:

According to the children, the lake – as dazzling as a mirror and shaped like the letter X – was created in the early days of the earth when a towering giant fell out of the sky; and he is still there, still alive, the regular ebb and flow of the tides being the gentle rhythm of his heart still beating, the crashing waves of October his convulsive attempts to free himself. (4)

Firstly, the lake is portrayed as an eerie image of entrapment, reflecting a tendency within the novel to become trapped by the way that things look, by the image. As Kaukab explains, ‘I care about what it is, yes, but I also care about what it looks like’ (62): people are literally trapped by appearances as judgements are made and actions taken on the basis of how situations ‘appear.’ Yet the lake/mirror is also ‘*sous rature*.’ Shaped like the letter X, it simultaneously proclaims and effaces (or crosses

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<sup>31</sup> Berthold Schoene-Harwood, ‘Beyond (T)race: Bildung and Proprioception in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 34 (1999), 159-168 (p. 165).

out) its existence. This indicates a situation where image *is* substituted for identity, as the evidence of the image's *mediation* is effectively destroyed.

Rushdie's Anglophile migrant, Saladin, experiences a similarly damaging crisis of 'mirroring' that reflects his fractured sense of identity. When he returns to India after a long period abroad, he begins to see his English and Indian selves as irreconcilable: 'he had begun to hear, in India's Babel, an ominous warning: don't come back again. When you have stepped through the looking-glass you step back at your peril. The mirror may cut you to shreds' (58). The idea of stepping through the glass takes the act of misrecognition a step further, as rather than identifying with the image, Saladin believes that he has become other to himself in an irreversible act. Even his name reflects an inability to have a translatable identity: he changes his name from Salahuddin Chamchawala to Saladin Chamcha, but is then subject to teasing as his adopted surname means 'spoon' in Hindi. This leads to Saladin being nicknamed as 'Spoono,' which is tellingly the slang for 'toady,' meaning a sycophant or hanger-on (54). The act of translation has made him a joke to his old Indian friends and his 'Indian self' is displaced by – rather than reconciled with – his English one.

This act of displacement is reflected, as in Syal's novel, through Saladin's own battle with a shadow. But in this scenario, the shadow is seen as another – albeit unacknowledged – part of himself. He is warned, '[w]atch out, Chamcha, look out for your shadow. That black fellow creeping up behind' (53). This indicates a split sense of identity, implying that his self and his shadow are not inextricably linked. Furthermore, the fact that it is his 'black' self that is stalking him also opens up a racial dimension, suggesting that he is prey to – and can never fully repress – his

Indian self. The simple conflation of evil and blackness parodies racial stereotypes; a man's fear of his own skin colour seems absurd and thereby shakes the foundations on which racial prejudices are built.

A large concern of traditional Gothic is the fear of the Other, who has historically figured as a cultural outsider spatially located within the imperial centre.<sup>32</sup> Tabish Khair describes two common representations of the Other in imperial Gothic, firstly, as 'a Self waiting to be assimilated,' or secondly as 'the purely negative image of the European Self, the obverse of the Self.' Khair connects these differing representations under the rubric of being 'utterly knowable in its [...] unknowability.'<sup>33</sup> Rushdie parodies the contradictions inherent in such stereotypes of the Other through the recurrent trope of the glass-man, who variously figures as a 'patient' in the hospital, as a nightmare, and as Saladin himself. John Erickson reads this character as suggestive of 'the transparency and emptiness of the stereotypical figure of the migrant [...] who to those outside (the Westerners) is seen through or returns their reflection, a sign of his deference and faithful emulation of them.' The language Erickson employs reflects the two contradictory uses of the Other identified by Khair. However, the irony that Erickson draws attention to, that 'however faithfully he may emulate them, he passes unseen except at a time of crisis,' marks the figure as satirical, representing a deficiency and lack in the white Self that needs an Other as a scapegoat.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Think of the Transylvanian Dracula in Bram Stoker's novel of the same name (1897), the Creole Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Frankenstein's monster that arrives from the wilderness to threaten civilisation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), or even the more complex figure of Dr. Aziz in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), where although the action occurs in Aziz's native India, the ruling class is predominantly white British, so within the realms of the social circle of the novel the feared Other is nevertheless a cultural outsider.

<sup>33</sup> Khair, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Erickson, p. 147.

So far I have illustrated the way that the repetition of the monstrous Other in colonial discourse gives an illusion of fixity that is designed to assure the safety of the white Self via distinction. However, Bhabha highlights the problem with this binary for both coloniser and colonised, as it does not give ‘access to the recognition of difference’ within the fixed categories. ‘It is that possibility of difference and circulation,’ Bhabha argues, ‘which would liberate the signifier of skin/culture from the fixations of racial typology, the analytics of blood, ideologies of racial and cultural dominance or degeneration.’<sup>35</sup> The postcolonial Gothic novels that I analyse in this chapter often illustrate the damage inflicted by the dangerous Self/Other relationship that arises when the other is seen as the ‘obverse of the self,’ before deconstructing the binaries and thereby questioning their power.<sup>36</sup>

Syal’s *Anita and Me* depicts the dangerous interdependency of such a relationship through the bond between Anita and her younger sister Tracey: ‘[w]hilst Anita grew taller, browner and louder, Tracey became shrunken, hollow-eyed and silent, seeming less like a sibling and more like a fleeting shadow attached to Anita’s snapping heels’ (266). In this relationship the sisters are interdependent (relying on each other for their identities), but like two people on a see-saw they cannot thrive simultaneously, as Tracey becomes everything Anita is not, and vice versa. Indeed, later in the novel, Tracey is described as a ghost whilst Anita becomes more physical, violent and bullying.

Similarly, *Maps for Lost Lovers* presents simplified versions of Self/Other relationships that play themselves out in damaging stereotypes. A child is described

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<sup>35</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 75.

<sup>36</sup> Khair, p. 4.

by a white relative as being ‘half Pakistani and half...er...er...er...human’ (10), thereby suggesting that Pakistanis are other than human. But rather than moving beyond the parameters of such stereotypes, some of the Pakistani migrants in the novel deal with the effects of racism by merely reversing the hierarchy and creating a white bogeyman to threaten children with (72). By simply reversing the binary opposition, the idea of racial hierarchy is upheld; clearly, to move beyond this, there needs to be a different Self/Other model.

Through the study of catoptrics (concerned with mirrors and reflected images), Vassilena Parashkevova convincingly demonstrates how Self/Other relationships in *The Satanic Verses* are more complex than their colonial counterparts:

The bi-partite model of original and reflected image, of same and other, that informs colonial discourse, is replaced in the novel by the paradigms of the inverted mirror and of the mirror reflected in another mirror, which compromise the concepts of origin, teleological directionality and cultural purity.<sup>37</sup>

Rushdie’s novel is replete with doubled characters – Gibreel/Saladin, Saladin/Salahuddin, the Prophet’s wives/the ‘whores of The Curtain,’ Gibreel/Azraeel, Ayesha/Ayesha – but the doubles are not Self/Other images, and the metafictional structure of the novel means that the reader is forced constantly to consider and reconsider how the doubles work.

In *The Satanic Verses*, Gothic ‘monsters’ play very human roles, further questioning the categories on which cultural constructions of Self and Other rest: the ‘evil

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<sup>37</sup> Vassilena Parashkevova, “‘Turn Your Watch Upside Down in Bombay and You See the Time in London’: Catoptric Urban Configurations in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42.3 (2007), 5-24 (p. 15).

skeleton' is a paedophile who forces Saladin into pleasuring him (38), Zeeny 'the beautiful vampire' claims that cannibal urges are induced by 'too much vegetable consumption' (52) and Rekha Merchant the 'ghost' is an ex-girlfriend that continues to interfere with Gibreel's life. The displacement of human characteristics onto 'monsters' signifies the urge to render Other that which cannot be comfortably reconciled to a secure and safe sense of Self. Alongside the human monsters are monstrous humans – described as 'ghouls' (48), 'sirens' (58) and 'ghosts' (61) – that assure the boundary between humanity and monstrosity is thoroughly blurred. As Maria Beville argues, 'it is evident that Rushdie is looking at postmodern existence and looking at it through the lens of the Gothic. In a sense, his avatars, witches, vampires and lost souls are satirical Gothic caricatures of our postmodern selves.'<sup>38</sup> The comical inclusion of Gothic caricatures dethrones the horror necessary for a fear of the Other, as the incredible incongruity of a vegetarian vampire – or an ex-girlfriend that even death will not cause to part – questions the very hierarchies on which such a world is ordered.

The damaging tendency to Other what we do not wish to identify with the Self is also alluded to at the end of Syal's novel. Meena comes of age in the tradition of the Bildungsroman, finding that her body 'for the first time ever fitted me to perfection and was all mine' (326). She duly prepares to leave Tollington and writes Anita a letter, but the latter 'never replied, of course' (328). Beyond the ostensible reading that Anita could not be bothered to stay in touch, the chilling tone of the ending suggests that Anita's function is already over and that she perhaps never existed independently at all. It forces a retrospective reading of the novel, whereby Anita *is*

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<sup>38</sup> Beville, p. 140.

Meena's double, and as I demonstrated earlier, both cannot thrive together. In Freudian terms, the double is both 'assurance of immortality' and 'ghastly harbinger of death.'<sup>39</sup> A Freudian reading of this text would therefore imply that as Meena learns to see the world through her own eyes, the racist, self-alienating side of her personality represented by/displaced onto Anita effectively dies.

Earlier in the novel, Sam Lowbridge – Anita's boyfriend and the leader of a racist gang – claims that he is not referring to her when he publicly vents his racist prejudices. Meena retorts, 'I am the others, Sam. You did mean me' (314). I support Christine Vogt-William's argument that 'Meena sees through Sam's tempting offer to free her from the racist stereotypes [...] as if he were accepting her as an "honorary member" of white Tollington society.' In doing so, Vogt-Williams asserts, Meena is 'taking her stand as one of the others.'<sup>40</sup> The stubborn assertion that she is 'the others' does not, however, illustrate a complete rejection of her English identity. Rather, she refuses to accept any threats to her hyphenated (British-Asian) identity, or to sacrifice one part of her identity at the expense of another. Thus Anita does not represent Englishness in general, but one (white, racist) example of it, an example that Meena must reject as a threat to a unified sense of self.

### **'*Ellowen Deeowen*': Rendering Spaces Uncanny/Redeeming Uncanny Spaces**

This section argues that postcolonial Gothic rewrites English spaces in acts of reclamation for migrant peoples. In order to conceptualise the way that traditionally

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<sup>39</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *Collected Papers*, ed. by Ernest Jones, trans. by Joan Riviere, 4 vols (London: Hogarth, 1934) IV, pp. 368-407 (p. 387).

<sup>40</sup> Christine Vogt-William, 'Rescue Me? No thanks!: *A Wicked Old Woman and Anita and Me*', in *Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Society in a 'Post'-Colonial World ASNEL Papers 9.2*, ed. by Geoffrey V. Davis, Peter H. Marsden, Bénédicte Ledent and Marc Delrez (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 387-97 (p. 391).

English spaces have been rendered uncanny, it is useful to turn to Baucom's analysis of the transportation of 'locales of Englishness' during the colonial period. As 'the empire's court chambers, schoolhouses, and playing fields' were exported to the colonies, colonised subjects 'took partial possession of those places, transforming the narratives of English identity that these spaces promised to locate.' According to Baucom, this not only changed the spaces in the present, but 'made the English past available to a colonial act of reinvention, a disobedient labor of remembrance.'<sup>41</sup> Spatial transformation – as a metaphor for greater acts of subversion and reclamation – is a key feature of the novels I consider in this chapter. To illustrate the relevance of Baucom's argument to this project, we might turn to a description found in *The Satanic Verses* of the Willingdon Club golf links:

[O]nly nine holes nowadays, skyscrapers having sprouted out of the other nine like giant weeds, or, let's say, like tombstones marking the sites where the torn corpse of the old city lay – there, right there, upper-echelon executives, missing the simplest putts; and, look above, tufts of anguished hair, torn from senior heads, wafting down from high-level windows. (12)

The golf links have evidently supplanted part of the old city of Bombay, yet the course has not been able to keep its original form, retaining only nine holes out of the customary eighteen, as it gives way to the new city – soon to have a new name – that is represented by the skyscrapers.

This uncomfortable and porous layering of spaces is a perfect illustration of what Baldick would term 'claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space,' a key tenet that he identifies in the Gothic tale.<sup>42</sup> The image of the skyscrapers as tombstones spatially

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<sup>41</sup> Baucom, pp. 38-39.

<sup>42</sup> Baldick, p. xix.

marks a temporal haunting, the interpenetration of the past and the present. This cleverly represents the relationship between the colonial and the ‘post’-colonial, as the colonial presence has been supplanted, but cannot be completely effaced. Moreover, by referring back to Baucom’s ‘locales,’ we find that the golf links as a site of English identity has in itself changed and a ‘disobedient labor of remembrance’ has occurred. Yet the transformation of sites of Englishness does not remain at a safe distance in India or Pakistan. For the remainder of this section, I will return to the former colonial centre, to see how sites of Englishness are transformed at ‘home.’

The very idea of home must first be questioned. For this to happen it is necessary to return to Freud and his essay on ‘The Uncanny,’ in which he explains the curiously paradoxical meaning of the German word ‘*heimlich*.’ The word ‘is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas [...]: on the one hand it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight.’<sup>43</sup> In Aslam’s novel the concept of home is transported, and through its transportation becomes at once familiar and unfamiliar:

As in Lahore, a road in this town is named after Goethe. There is a Park Street here as in Calcutta, a Malabar Hill as in Bombay, and a Naag Tolla Hill as in Dhaka. Because it was difficult to pronounce the English names, the men who arrived in this town in the 1950s had re-christened everything they saw before them. They had come from across the Subcontinent, lived together ten to a room, and the name that one of them happened to give to a street or landmark was taken up by the others, regardless of where they themselves were from – Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan. Only one name has been accepted

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<sup>43</sup> Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, p. 375.

by every group, remaining unchanged. It's the name of the town itself. Dasht-e-Tanhaii. (28-29)

According to Freud, 'the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimlich*, home-like, familiar; the prefix 'un' is the token of repression.'<sup>44</sup> Thus the English town that bears Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi names is *unheimlich*, containing for its immigrant communities elements of the once-homely that have now become unfamiliar. The original home (in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) must be repressed so as to accommodate the new place that the migrants occupy, meaning that the new sites become uncanny *doppelgängers* of the old.

Bhabha translates Freud's '*unheimlich*' to the Anglicised 'unhomely' in order to represent a typical condition of migrancy, describing 'unhomeliness' as 'the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.' 'To be unhomed,' Bhabha argues, 'is not to be homeless, nor can the "unhomely" be easily accommodated in that easy division of social life into private and public spheres.'<sup>45</sup> The 'unhomely' nature of the English town in Aslam's novel is confirmed through its residents' insistence on still referring to their countries of origin as home, and Kaukab's house is figured as 'temporary lodgings in a country never thought of as home' (96). Indeed, this is a community defined by its loneliness, as the religious connotations of 'Wilderness of Solitude' and 'Desert of Loneliness' denoted by the name 'Dasht-e-Tanhaii' suggest a place of trial and suffering. The downbeat connotations of the name prevent it from being a rejuvenative and communal act of unofficial naming and instead signify resignation and sorrow, even punishment.

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<sup>44</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 399.

<sup>45</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 9.

Yet the idea of home is treated in a different way at other points in *Maps for Lost Lovers*, as the English town is slowly ‘exoticised’ through the transformation of nature. By the end of the novel, the town is home to fireflies, parakeets and wild peacocks, all typically native to the Subcontinent rather than England. The migrant birds and insects acclimatising to their new English locales bridge the gap between what is conceived of as ‘home’ (the Subcontinent) and ‘abroad’ (England) by familiarising the space and nature.

*The Satanic Verses* similarly defamiliarises English spaces, but this is alternatively figured as confronting the white majority with sensations of alienation and dislocation commonly experienced by migrant communities. The country is deconstructed from the centre, starting with its capital, which Saladin creeps up on like a child playing Grandmother’s footsteps. Even the spelling – *ElLOWen deeowen* – defamiliarises the name and has phonic similarities to Halloween, creating an eerie and sinister sensation when the reader realises what is being referred to. ‘In his secret heart, he crept silently up on London, letter by letter, just as his friends crept up to him. *ElLOWen deeowen, London*’: the familiar has become distinctly unfamiliar (37).

The name of London is further defamiliarised as Rushdie parallels it with fictional cities: ‘[h]ow hot it is: steamy, close, intolerable. This is no Proper London: not this improper city. Airstrip One, Mahogonny, Alphaville. He wanders through a confusion of language. Babel: a contraction of the Assyrian “babilu”. “The gate of God.” Babylondon’ (459). The cities chosen are dystopian ones, ending with the merging of Babylon – the real city that nevertheless retains a mythical/fictional status, being a synonym for evil in the dystopian narrative of Revelation – and London.

Furthermore, London is frequently figured as a kind of Hell: '[t]he city of London, transformed into Jahannum, Gehenna, Muspellheim' (254). These places are synonyms for Hell in Muslim, Judaeo-Christian and Norse mythologies accordingly, and by comparison London acquires a fictional status that, however horrific, opens up space for it to be re-narrated.

Wexler's argument that '[n]ational identity needs some unifying principle that transcends empirical experience, some conviction that events are related to one another, some constant to establish a pattern among events,' suggests that London needs to be more than a space, it needs to be a fiction.<sup>46</sup> This fictionalisation is enabled through the magic-realist framework of Rushdie's narrative that allows dreams and 'reality' to seep into each other. Like the blurring of actual and fictional cities, the doubling of Gibreel's waking and dreaming lives performs a deconstruction of reality's hierarchical superiority to the extent that he cannot distinguish between the two, and fears that his waking life is in fact someone else's dream (83). Yet he eventually realises that '[t]he doctors had been wrong [...] to treat him for schizophrenia; the splitting was not in him but in the universe' (351). This translates psychological trauma onto a material level. Clearly a splitting world is more fearful than a single deranged mind, and Rushdie therefore creates a world where no one can feel safe, comfortable, or 'at home.' Yet this defamiliarisation of the once-familiar serves a dual purpose, also allowing for the redemption of the once-uncanny: in a world where everything has become unfamiliar, in turn nothing is strange.

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<sup>46</sup> Wexler, p. 138.

Redemption of the once-uncanny also occurs in Syal's novel. This is facilitated primarily through the motif of the Gothic house overlooking the village, which engenders rumours and speculation that a child-killer stalks the place. The Gothic house sticks out like a sore thumb as an antiquated symbol of fear, yet it provides much of the fuel for Meena's wild and terrible fantasies: '[t]here was someone in the grounds of the Big House and they were watching us. [...] A figure, huge and shaggy as a bear was standing just beyond the fence near the crossroads' (206). In a narrative containing much psychological trauma in the form of racism, bullying and alienation, this traditional – and more than a little ridiculous – Gothic trope initially seems unnecessary as a further source of horror, yet it serves a particular purpose in the novel. At the climax, Meena finds that the house is owned by an Indian gentleman and his French wife, and she no longer feels threatened by the place. In the unfamiliar she has found someone familiar, and is able to shed her childish fears. As such the space is redeemed and made unthreatening.

In a related instance, Meena speaks of the effect that her father's singing has on her:

Papa's singing always unleashed these emotions which were unfamiliar and instinctive at the same time, in a language I could not recognise but felt I could speak in my sleep, in my dreams, evocative of a country I had never visited but which sounded like the only home I had ever known. The songs made me realise that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England. (112)

Immersing herself in the Punjabi language is for Meena (initially) like entering an unknown world where all is strange and unfamiliar. Yet in the world summoned by the language, India seems less distant to her, enabling her to start reconciling herself

to a country that has always been unknown. This passage simultaneously reverses the colonial impulse of Rupert Brooke's World War One poem 'The Soldier':

If I die think only this of me:

That there's some corner of a foreign field

That is forever England.<sup>47</sup>

The implication is that the colonising mission (as implied by Meena's mimicry of Brooke's rhetoric) has not fully claimed her for its own, as she begins to become a postcolonial subject rather than being defined by leftover colonial rhetoric.

*The Satanic Verses* similarly renders spaces uncanny in order to reclaim them for a postcolonial society. Baucom outlines Rushdie's rendering of 'the uncanny as the redemptive' by reading ways in which Gibreel wishes to tropicalise London. Baucom notes that the list Gibreel makes – including '[s]picy food, religious fervour, expansive behavior' – are all '[n]ot-English in a particular way, for they are the eclectic fragments of the cultures that the English empire collected [...] and now wishes to forget.' The conclusions that Baucom draws convincingly demonstrate how the postcolonial city might be reclaimed:

To tropicalize London is not to make the metropolis a foreign city but to deny the foreignness of these differences to the city, to announce that London is a conurbation of such differences, to reveal that when he speaks of siestas, better cricketers, and the use of water as well as paper in toilets, he speaks of 'English scenes.' [...] In returning England's elsewhere to its here, and in collapsing the multiple landscapes of its imperial past onto the metropolitan expanse of its postimperial present, Gibreel has succeeded in redeeming the

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<sup>47</sup> Rupert Brooke, 'The Soldier', in *1914 & Other Poems*, by Rupert Brooke (West Norwood: Complete Press, 1915), p. 15.

city. He has brought newness into the world. He has revealed a new way of being English.<sup>48</sup>

Newness is brought into Rushdie's world through a revolution in the way that English spaces are framed and understood. England is forced to face up to its repressed colonising past and simultaneously to recognise 'exotic' practices as a crucial part of contemporary English identity.

At the same time as Rushdie allows the interpenetration of dreams and reality to bring newness into the country, he also illustrates the danger of pursuing regressive dreams of a 'dead' version of England. This is portrayed by Saladin, whose English wife wants to divorce him primarily because she realises that he 'was not in love with her at all, but with that voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit' (180). The archaic language indicates the impossibility of returning to the idyllic England that Saladin dreams of, yet also lends an absurdity to the tone. This serves to question whether such an England ever existed in the first place by foregrounding the fictionality of such an idealised construction.

The absurdity of trying to recollect a dead version of England is highlighted once again as London is reduced to a Dickensian pastiche at a party that Gibreel, Saladin, and their respective partners attend:

The creature has been approaching Chamcha while delivering herself of these lines; - unfastening, the while, her blouse; - and he, mongoose to her cobra, stands there transfixed; while she, exposing a shapely right breast, and offering

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<sup>48</sup> Baucom, pp. 211-12.

it to him, points out that she has drawn upon it, - as an act of civic pride, - the map of London, no less, in red magic-marker, with the river all in blue. The metropolis summons him; - but he, giving an entirely Dickensian cry, pushes his way out of the Curiosity Shop into the madness of the street. (424)

The scale of Saladin's vision of London is mimicked in this scene, through its reduction to a cardboard cut-out of a fictional landscape that can be negotiated in a few strides at the party (or even mapped out on a 'shapely right breast'). Furthermore, the image of London as a drawing in magic marker suggests performativity and impermanence: it can easily be removed or hidden, whilst its suggestive anatomical placement degrades it. Mikhail Bakhtin states that '[t]he essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is to transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.'<sup>49</sup> Saladin's lofty English ideals and dreams are degraded to a comically material level and by implication English spaces are restored to a material level and rid of their romanticised connotations.

### **Terrorising Speech/Terrifying Silence**

Colonisation had a role both in the act of silencing and in equating silence with Otherness. One of the great 'successes' of imperialism was that of rendering its victims voiceless, by refusing to engage with native languages. Thomas Macaulay's infamous 'Minute on Indian Education' proposes forming 'a class [...] Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in morals, in intellect' simply by teaching Indians the

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<sup>49</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* excerpt in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. by Pam Morris (Edward Arnold: London, 1994), pp. 194-244 (p. 205).

English language.<sup>50</sup> This demonstrates that whilst the educated classes then have a voice (of sorts), the uneducated classes are effectively rendered voiceless, as they are unable to communicate in the language of the ruling class. When taken alongside the equation of silence with Otherness articulated in Gothic fiction – in which ‘[t]he screams and sulky silences of Gothic fiction do not set out to “represent” the Other; they primarily register the irreducible presence of Otherness’ – the real power exerted through silencing becomes apparent.<sup>51</sup>

Gothic tales frequently deal with the unspeakable or the terror too terrible to give voice, registering the greatest horrors through what is left unsaid. This occurs in Syal’s novel, where horrific events hover on the periphery of the story, never fully expressed in words: ‘I wished I had not seen what I was sure I had seen, the row of bruises around Tracey’s thighs, as purple as the clover heads, two bizarre bracelets perfectly mimicking the imprint of ten cruel, angry fingers’ (142). The horror of child abuse is hinted at but never fully articulated, and the physical signs trigger the imagination to supply the rest of the information, which becomes (if possible) even more fearful in its infinite possibility. Punter describes child abuse as ‘the great unwritten narrative of the twentieth century,’ putting this down to an observation that ‘the pressure of the secret, the pressure of the unspoken and unwritten, has become more evident.’ He links this pressure to ‘the postcolonial,’ in which this “open secret”, is directly related to the dehumanisation attendant upon deprivation and, in the final analysis, on the relation between deprivation, slavery and colonialism.’<sup>52</sup> Punter’s observation coincides with a reading of *Anita and Me*, in which Tracey’s

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas Macaulay, ‘Minute on Indian Education’, in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 428-30 (p. 430).

<sup>51</sup> Khair, p. 173.

<sup>52</sup> Punter, pp. 140-41.

story can be understood as mirroring the novel's other 'open secret': that colonialism is the unspoken root cause of the racism that Meena and her family receive.

So how can postcolonial Gothic deconstruct the bonds between silence, terror and alterity? The remainder of this section focuses on *Maps for Lost Lovers* as the novel that gives the most space to the role of silence. I consider three responses that the novel offers to my question: firstly, it highlights the terror inherent in the *act* of silencing; secondly, it registers the voices of characters that imperial Gothic has traditionally Othered; finally, it gestures towards the potentially terrifying power of *speech* and thereby destabilises the equation of terror with silence. I construct the rest of this section around these three impulses.

The violence inherent in the act of silencing is foregrounded as silence becomes a source of alienation and loneliness for characters populating Aslam's novel. The character most affected by the infliction of silence is Kaukab, who feels increasingly alienated from the country and her family due to her inability to speak English. This is specifically linked to her gender and class positions, which work together to keep her at home. Her husband's high-standing job means that she does not need to work herself, but rather than knocking on the doors of friends for company as she used to in Pakistan, she finds herself not knowing how to approach strangers and 'full of apprehension regarding the white race' (32). Her children have also moved out and begun their own lives in England and when they return home Kaukab describes them as having a 'new layer of stranger-ness on them' (146). As second generation migrants, brought up with England as their home, they seem increasingly alien to their mother. Kaukab's alienation is further highlighted through her observation that

because onomatopoeic words are translated ‘even things in England spoke a different language than the one they did back in Pakistan’ (35). Alienation occurs at the site of language itself, as not only does it alienate her from the people around her, but from ‘things’ too.

Jugnu’s story similarly foregrounds the terror of silencing. Repeatedly associated with moths that have no mouths and are therefore ‘born to die’ (21), Jugnu effectively haunts the narrative every time moths are mentioned. Though the moths’ lack of mouth primarily signifies an inability to eat that engenders their death, there is an uncanny resemblance between this ‘mouthlessness’ and acts of deliberate and often violent silencing that occur in the novel. The ultimate silencing effected by Jugnu’s murder is paralleled to the creatures without mouths that he was so fascinated by during his lifetime.<sup>53</sup>

The interconnectedness of violence, silence and exile has parallels with Gayatri Spivak’s work on subalternity and silence, in which she grapples with the issues of representation in both its discursive (*Darstellung*) and its political (*Vertretung*) senses to describe the ‘epistemic violence’ involved in representing those locked out of the systems of knowledge and power within which they are being represented.<sup>54</sup> Spivak draws attention to the impossibility of the subaltern speaking as follows: ‘[y]ou make the subaltern the conscious subject of his – in the case of Subaltern Studies – own

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<sup>53</sup> Moore argues that moths are also ‘associated with the dangers of sexual transgression’ in the novel. See further ‘British Muslim Identities’, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Gayatri Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313 (pp. 308, 279).

history. The subaltern disappears.’<sup>55</sup> Despite Spivak’s advocacy of ‘antixist work among women of color or women in class oppression’ and ‘information retrieval in these silenced areas,’ she warns that ‘the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject [...] will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever.’<sup>56</sup>

Aslam’s novel engages with this dichotomy by giving a voice to characters, such as Kaukab, who ‘cannot speak,’ yet simultaneously foregrounding her burden of silence and thereby depicting a constant and insistent denial of speech.<sup>57</sup> For Moore, ‘the use of shifting perspective and the interweaving of speech and silence suggest that subaltern experience may be transmittable only in contingent and aporetic fashion.’<sup>58</sup> This suggests that the very style of the novel reflects a concern with representing subaltern subjects and engages with Spivak’s concern that ‘[i]t is the slippage from rendering visible the mechanism to rendering vocal the individual [...] that is consistently troublesome.’<sup>59</sup> The novel instead serves to illustrate acts of actual and effective (or political) silencing without fully ventriloquising the subjects.

By structuring much of the novel’s violence around acts of gossip or destructive words, the potentially terrorising nature of speech is employed to challenge the elision of silence with terror. One of the victims of slander in Aslam’s novel is Suraya, who goes to a feuding family’s house in order to request them to be compassionate towards

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<sup>55</sup> Gayatri Spivak, ‘Negotiating the Structures of Violence’, in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 138-51 (p. 144).

<sup>56</sup> Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ p. 295.

<sup>57</sup> It might be more precise to say that Kaukab does not have a voice that can be heard within English discourse.

<sup>58</sup> Moore, ‘British Muslim Identities’, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ p. 285.

her pregnant niece. Deeming that it would ‘cast a mark on their honour’ if they did not rape Suraya, a woman ‘from the other side of the battle-line,’ the men agree to tell people that they have taken advantage of her (158). Gossip dictates popular understanding of events to the extent that Suraya describes the mere aspersion of rape to be ‘as bad as if they had raped her,’ because ‘[w]hat mattered was not what you knew yourself to have actually happened, but what other people thought had happened’ (158). Events deteriorate further as the stigma incurred by a rape that has not in fact happened leads her drunkard husband to divorce her, simply by ‘uttering the deadly word [*talaaq*] in triplicate’ (159). According to *Qur’anic* scripture Suraya has been divorced from her husband and must remarry another man before she can go back to him, even though he is remorseful and cannot remember having uttered the words in the sobriety of the morning.<sup>60</sup>

Patricia Meyer Spacks praises the liberating qualities of gossip, portraying it as a democratising discourse because it ‘incorporates the possibility that people utterly lacking in public power may affect the views of figures who make things happen in the public sphere.’<sup>61</sup> Yet as I have indicated, gossip has a far more powerful (and destructive) effect in Aslam’s novel than Meyer Spacks’s libertarian view allows for. Private and public discourses are brought into much closer proximity as private relationships come under public scrutiny: ‘[t]he neighbourhood is a place of Byzantine intrigue and emotional espionage, where when two people stop to talk on the street their tongues are like the two halves of a scissor coming together, cutting reputations

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<sup>60</sup> See *Qur’an* 2.230. The novel’s interpretation of this piece of *Qur’anic* scripture is controversial, however. The practice of taking a second husband *in order* to return to the first is widely condemned within Islam. Suraya could only conceivably return to the first husband if the second divorce had happened for genuine reasons. I thank Aroosa Kanwal for this observation.

<sup>61</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (London: University of Chicago, 1986), pp. 6-7.

and good names to shreds' (176). Thus the novel expresses the dangers of both silence/secretcy *and* speech, and the violent imagery surrounding it indicates both the power of language and the force of repression required to contain it.

Speech and silence are shown to be ambivalently empowering in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Chakor, Jugnu's father, cuts out his own tongue in an act that ostensibly reads a horrific self-mutilation, silencing in its most violent guise. However, this act is simultaneously self-assertive: he 'had cut out his tongue before setting fire to himself lest the pain cause him to call out for help' (85). This decision enables him to be cremated like a Hindu and prevents his family from giving him a Muslim burial. Chakor's desire to remove his own tongue suggests that it can be a mocking impediment and that speech itself can be treacherous. This violent image implies the ambivalent power of both speech *and* silence, and in doing so challenges both the violence of colonial silencing and the elision of terror and silence effected in imperial Gothic.

### **Horrible Histories/Traumatic Desires**

In the novels that I consider in this chapter, there is an ongoing tension between inescapable traumatic pasts that return to haunt characters in the present, and the perverse desire to cash in on, claim, or create a traumatised past as a point of personal or communal identification. This dualistic impulse is captured in *Anita and Me*, as Meena learns that history is something to be taken seriously: 'I realised that the past was not a mere sentimental journey [...]. It was a murky bottomless pool full of monsters and the odd shining coin, with a deceptively still surface and a deadly undercurrent' (75). Delving into history is depicted as potentially lethal, but the

image of the 'shining coin' also indicates its exchange value. My suggestion is that postcolonial Gothic creates or commodifies a traumatised past in order to engender new points of identification through shared experiences. By constructing this argument, I am synthesising the functions of postcolonial theory, trauma theory and Gothic literature in unusual ways, so I shall explain my connections below.

I understand Cathy Caruth's description of the experience of trauma at a remove as illustrative of its potential significance to a postcolonial condition. Caruth argues that 'since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time.'<sup>62</sup> This aids our understanding of why the remnant traumas of colonialism might be experienced at a historical and spatial remove in contemporary England.

The relationship between trauma and literature is also a crucial one, calling into question the function that literature might play in trauma recovery. Susan Brison outlines the cathartic function of storytelling, arguing that as a 'speech act that defuses traumatic memory,' it enables survivors to 'establishing [...] control' and to 'remake a self.'<sup>63</sup> According to Brison's argument, storytelling enables activity after the debilitating passivity of trauma, and I want to extend this to suggest that the propensity of trauma for 'remaking a self' encourages its appropriation (or even fabrication) *in order* to remake a national 'self.'

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<sup>62</sup> Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Trauma and Culture I', *American Imago*, 48.1 (1991), pp. 1-12 (p. 7).

<sup>63</sup> Susan Brison, 'Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self', in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by M. Bla, J. Crewe, and L. Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 1999), pp. 39-54 (p. 40).

Yet the idea of storytelling and narrative catharsis as the *telos* of trauma recovery has been criticised by many postcolonial scholars as being a westernised and individualist way of dealing with the effects of trauma. Stef Craps and Gert Buelens question why ‘the study of trauma has traditionally tended to focus on individual psychology,’ when colonial trauma is a ‘collective experience,’ requiring ‘material recovery.’ They express a concern that the dominant study of trauma in the West tends to prioritise what they term ‘immaterial’ over material recovery.<sup>64</sup> Though I agree that to overlook material recovery in the case of colonial trauma is politically evasive, to devalue the suffering of individuals seems, to me, equally perverse. Therefore, in my analysis of postcolonial Gothic literature – which can admittedly do very little in the way of material reparation – I will balance a consideration of individual psychologies with broader socio-political concerns regarding the national digestion and appropriation of trauma.

Gothic literature has a long history of narrating trauma, sharing a vocabulary of wounds, transgressions and haunting. Yet the relationship between trauma and Gothic takes an unusual turn in contemporary literature. Alexandra Warwick describes the current ‘prevalence of Gothic’ as ‘the effect of a kind of aftershock [...] of psychoanalysis.’ She notes the current pervasiveness of the ‘discourse of “therapy”’ that is employed to represent ‘individual and collective emotional experience.’<sup>65</sup> Contemporary Gothic’s indebtedness to the discourse of therapy as a framing device for the revelation of trauma is exemplified in Hanif Kureishi’s novel *Something to Tell You* (2007), in which the main character is both analyst and analysand.

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<sup>64</sup> Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, ‘Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels’, *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1 (2008), 1-12 (pp. 3-4).

<sup>65</sup> Alexandra Warwick, ‘Feeling Gothicky?’ *Gothic Studies*, 9 (2007), 5-19 (p. 10).

Gothic tropes of haunting, incestuous families and repressed desires litter the novel, but its main concern is with how past trauma constitutes and creates the self. The body is once again the canvas on which psychological trauma is painted, as is illustrated when the protagonist, Jamal, describes leaving his first appointment with an analyst:

When I was outside, standing on the street knowing I would return in a couple of days, waves of terror tore through me, my body disassembled, exploding. To prevent myself collapsing, I had to hold onto a lamp post. I began to defecate uncontrollably. Shit ran down my legs and into my shoes. I began to weep; then I vomited, vomiting the past. My shirt was covered in sick. My insides were on the outside, everyone could see me. [...] I came to love my analyst more than my father. He gave me more; he saved my life; he made and re-made me.<sup>66</sup>

This abject description mimics the process of analysis, crudely bringing the ‘shit’ to the surface for all to see. What is most shocking about this scene is the love Jamal expresses immediately after the retelling of such a humiliating moment, indicating a desire for the ‘trauma’ to be evident. His gratefulness at having been remade relies upon having previously been un-whole.<sup>67</sup> A love for the manifestation of trauma coincides with the way that Warwick redefines contemporary Gothic as ‘the desire *for* trauma,’ in which ‘the experience of trauma, and not the healing of it, is that which will make us whole.’<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *Something to Tell You* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 62. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>67</sup> In Chapter One I discuss the motif of rebirth and the pain that necessarily accompanies this process.

<sup>68</sup> Warwick, p. 11.

Bearing this in mind, what is most interesting about Kureishi's novel is the subtle linking of personal and national trauma. Whilst the storyline superficially follows a personal narrative, it also operates on a political level, with contemporaneous political events providing the backdrop to the novel. The personal climax neatly coincides with the 7/7 London bombings: '[t]hat day and night we were haunted by TV images of sooty injured figures with bloody faces, devastated in their blamelessness, being led through dark blasted tunnels under our pavements and roads whilst others screamed' (313). The subterranean image of the London Underground bombings acts as a kind of national psychopathology, a trauma that must be dealt with and not repressed. Furthermore, the idea that English citizens watching television on the day of the bombings are immediately haunted indicates that the haunting occurs simultaneously to the event, as if it has already been transferred to the nation's traumatised past.

The combination of individual and cultural trauma is integral to Kureishi's novel, as both traumas are handled in the same way: by narrating the trauma and reinstating linguistic order so as to move on. The *desire* for trauma is evident in the speed that it is recognised, named and dealt with. Yet the very speed with which this act of healing and transferral to the 'past' is meant to occur makes it seem ridiculous and brings to the forefront the impossibility of dealing with cultural trauma in such a manner.

Ranjana Khanna's theorisation of critical melancholia highlights the impossibility of fully narrating the past:

Melancholia as symptom and reading practice [...] offer[s] a way of gauging how critical agency functions constantly to undo injustices performed in the

name of justice and novelty. The impossibility of completed digestion of the past, and its calm production of novelty, manifests itself in constant critique.<sup>69</sup>

This encourages a critical engagement with postcolonialism, as to assert that colonialism is fully ‘post’ – that its past traumas have been effectively dealt with and that we are able to move on – would be damaging and belittle its real impact. Warwick summarises the ‘dominant rhetoric of contemporary experience’ as the understanding that ‘there are defining events in our individual, social and national lives that are insufficiently assimilated or experienced at the time of their occurrence, which we are then belatedly possessed by, unable to proceed until the fallout is dealt with.’<sup>70</sup> Khanna argues, however, that the ‘fallout’ cannot be fully ‘dealt with’ as Warwick’s statement implies, but that this in itself can be put to a positive use, as ‘critical agency emerges because a remainder always exists that cannot be assimilated into the normalizing constraints of the superego on the ego.’ Rather than narrating the past in order to move on, the fact that trauma cannot be fully digested leads to a state of melancholia, or permanent mourning, where the loss cannot be overcome but must always be critically evaluated.<sup>71</sup>

The psychoanalytic backdrop of Kureishi’s novel may raise questions over the way that trauma is handled on both individual and cultural levels, but its real achievement is in tapping into the *desire* for cultural trauma. In an article on cultural trauma, Kai Erikson asserts that ‘trauma can create community’ and that ‘trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common

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<sup>69</sup> Ranjana Khanna, ‘Post-Palliative: Coloniality’s Affective Dissonance’, *Postcolonial Text*, 2.1 (2006) <<http://journals.sfu.ca/pocol/index.php/pct/article/view/385/815>> [accessed 26 March 2010] (para 2 of 37).

<sup>70</sup> Warwick, p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> Khanna, ‘Post-Palliative’, (para. 6-8 of 37).

backgrounds can.’<sup>72</sup> I would argue, therefore, that trauma can be a tool for unification *in the place of* common languages or common backgrounds: this could be the tool for writing postcolonial England. I am not suggesting that this is cause for celebration, that trauma as cultural glue is a fine thing. As Erikson states, ‘[t]he point to be made here is not that calamity serves to strengthen the bonds linking people together – it does not, most of the time – but that the shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship.’<sup>73</sup> The desire for similarly traumatic pasts (be it individual or communal) to engender a new sense of identity can also be traced through *Anita and Me* and *Maps for Lost Lovers*.

Before any of Meena’s real troubles begin in *Anita and Me*, she repeatedly fantasises about horror, complaining, ‘I wish I was a tortured soul’ (20). Yet the kind of horror that she desires illustrates a large element of displacement, making the horror safe and at a distance, as she plans a night of fun that involves ‘playing a screaming blonde heroine being pursued by nameless wailing monsters’ (109). Syal locates Meena’s fantasising and often deceitful manner in a decided absence of an accessible history, as her protagonist excuses herself at the start by saying, ‘I’m not really a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong’ (10). Her sense of disinheritance from history is marked by listening to her parents’ conversations behind closed doors, as she imagines India to be ‘a country that seemed full to bursting with drama, excitement, history in the making, and for the first time [she] desperately wanted to visit India and claim some of this magic as [hers]’ (211). This indicates a desire for both individual

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<sup>72</sup> Kai Erikson, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’ in *Trauma: Explorations of Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 183-99 (pp. 185, 186).

<sup>73</sup> Erikson, p. 190.

and national definition that she thinks that she can achieve by ‘claiming’ an authentic and sufficiently ‘troubled’ history.

In Aslam’s novel, ghosts are employed as a recurrent motif, pointing to a similar desire to claim trauma. Roger Luckhurst defines ghosts as ‘the signals of atrocities, marking sites of untold violence, a traumatic past whose traces remain to attest to a lack of testimony.’<sup>74</sup> By seizing the ghost one can effectively lay claim to the ‘untold violence’ that it signifies, whilst their unfinished business represents a blank canvas, enabling the person that claims the ghost to map their own story upon it. *Maps for Lost Lovers* boasts two ghosts, one with a glowing stomach, and one with glowing hands. This pair of ghosts are variously named as Shamas and Suraya (by Shamas), a murdered Muslim girl and her Hindu lover (by the Hindu lover) and Jugnu and his girlfriend Chanda, the murdered couple around which the narrative revolves (again by Shamas). There are various explanations given for the luminous bodies, and the lack of consensus over the identity of the ghosts again illustrates a desire to be the ‘haunted’ (or even *haunting*) one, as it is notable that at least two of the people identified as ghosts are not even dead at the time that they are named as such.

However, it may be that characters in Aslam’s novel dwell on past traumas as a way of avoiding the more pressing horrors of the present. Kaukab comforts herself with a connection to history, enjoying the work that links her to her female ancestors and preferring to be trapped in her house with ghosts than outside facing the world:

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<sup>74</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 93.

[T]here's nothing for her out there in Dasht-e-Tanhaii, to notice or be interested in. Everything is here in this house. Every beloved absence is present here.

An oasis – albeit a haunted one – in the middle of the Desert of Loneliness.

Out there, there was nothing but humiliation. (65)

This signifies a desire for communal belonging, but suggests that she can only find it in a romanticised past rather than the lonely and alienating present.

Kaukab's daughter, Mah-Jabin, also defers to the past to take the sting from the present. After blaming an irritability towards her mother on thinking about her Uncle's murder, '[s]he winces inwardly at what she has just said, feeling degraded, that already the death of the two loved people is being used in deceit because she does not wish to hurt this living person by her side' (102). Here trauma is used as an excuse, illustrating the danger and duplicity involved in unjustly appropriating a real trauma for one's own ends.

In this chapter I have argued that postcolonial Gothic has two key imperatives: to challenge the destructive binaries found in imperial Gothic and to appropriate familiar Gothic tropes for a new context in order to comment upon contemporary desires and fears. The novels I have considered explore traumas specific to experiences of migration, positioning colonialism as the original trauma that has prefigured generations of people suffering from displacement, alienation and racism. Appropriation of familiar tropes of doubling and monstrosity rewritten from the perspective of the Other (I use the term ironically here) highlights and deconstructs a tendency to displace onto the Other traits that cannot comfortably be assimilated to the

Self. Silence – which has been both a tool of colonialism and a way of registering terror in the Gothic – is deconstructed as characters negotiate the ambivalent empowerment enabled by speech and silence. Postcolonial Gothic continually makes connections between the personal and the national body, as traumas overlap and mutually infect. English spaces are rendered uncanny as a step towards their reclamation for a postcolonial society. In a perverse generic twist, a contemporary desire for trauma is appropriated by postcolonial Gothic as a means of generating a sense of collective heritage.

If Gothic has been a grand narrative in the past – a way of reading ourselves and our history, of making clear distinctions between Self and Other, home and not-home, now and then – it has become a meta-narrative in contemporary literature, as Gothic is used self-consciously to interrogate its own framework and to *create* trauma in an age where the repressed must constantly and relentlessly be dragged to the surface even as it happens. These contemporary novels are able to use another time (past traumas), another space (defamiliarised and reinvented English locales) and another Other (questioning the grounds upon which alterity is judged) in order to criticise an old way of being English, and to tentatively create something new from the ruins.

## Chapter Three

### **‘Pitting levity against gravity’: Laughing through the Tears/Laughing through the Fears in Postcolonial British Comedy**

Comedy has been employed in the service of a number of masters, politically ranging from the reactionary and conservative – ridiculing cultural outsiders to preserve the status quo – to the radical and revisionary, challenging stereotypes and disrupting the status quo. Historically, constructions of Britishness have relied upon assumptions of inclusion and exclusion, superiority and inferiority and a series of hierarchies, which have been reinforced through complementary forms of comedy. Comedy has both a political role – mimicking, commenting on, or transparently embedded in hierarchical structures of power – and a psychological one, giving voice to taboo subjects and revealing socially-repressed desires or fears.

In this chapter I discuss two waves of postcolonial British comedy in film, identifying ways in which they challenge or support the contemporaneous zeitgeist. The first generation of comedy pursues a happy, multicultural idyll through the use of gentle and inclusive comedy.<sup>1</sup> Though this type of comedy allows for the subtle undermining of stereotypes, I argue that its utopian tendency relies on the repression of social challenges that would threaten its potential harmony. A second generation of comedy employs laughter as an alternative response to fear, centring on the socially ostracised figures of the suicide bomber and the gangster repressed by the previous generation’s idealism. Postcolonial comedy seeks to challenge the residual

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<sup>1</sup> By terming this the first generation of postcolonial British comedy, I use the definition locally to apply to films analysed in the thesis and do not mean to imply that this is the first generation *per se*.

stereotypes and hierarchies of the colonial era, but as the social dominant shifts according to government, international affairs and new modes of exclusion, the types of comedy and subject matter must also evolve in order to remain socially relevant. Before analysing the films I will outline the critical frameworks that are pertinent to postcolonial comedy.

### **Superiority Theory**

Comedy's power to exclude, commonly understood as the 'superiority theory,' is theorised by Thomas Hobbes, who states that '[l]aughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others.'<sup>2</sup> Hobbes's definition of comedy relies upon a hierarchy: we laugh at difference in those considered inferior, and for this to be effective there must be a clear distinction between (as Hobbes terms) 'others' and 'ourselves.' What is concerning about this type of comedy is the slippage between normativity and superiority: we might rephrase Hobbes's definition of comedy as equating difference with inferiority and therefore laughing at difference. The elision of superiority and normativity is made apparent in Northrop Frye's ethical analysis of satire, an aggressive comical technique that serves to ridicule individuals or social groups and is often employed in the service of social critique. Frye argues, '[o]f course a moral norm is inherent in satire: satire presents something as grotesque: the grotesque is by definition a deviant from the norm: the norm makes the satire satiric.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. by W. Molesworth, 11 vols (London: John Bohn, 1840), IV: *Human Nature*, pp. 1-77 (p. 46).

<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, 'Norms, Moral or Other, in Satire: A Symposium', *Satire Newsletter*, ed. by George A. Test, 2.1 (1964), 2-25 (p. 9).

In postcolonial terms, comedy employed in such a manner is clearly problematic, essentially laughing at difference, associating difference with inferiority and revolving around a set of hierarchised binary identifications. But what is of more interest are the particulars of the Others chosen and the ‘threat’ that they represent to the ‘dominant group that constructs them.’ As Susan Purdie reasons, ‘there is no point in “othering” people who have no claim to the identity space you are trying to occupy.’<sup>4</sup> As such, comedy based on superiority inadvertently exposes the imagined power of the ‘othered’ group and reveals underlying social fears. I will return to the relationship between comedy and fear in the final section of this chapter.

Purdie posits three positions adopted during a joking exchange that are crucial to understanding the mechanisms of comedy. These are the Teller, the Audience and the Butt, all of which can at times be embodied by one person.<sup>5</sup> Purdie defines the relationship between the three available positions: ‘the “Butt” [...] is constituted by the joking exchange as excluded from the Teller-Audience relationship and, in being so, reciprocally confirms the collusion of these two positions as masterful jokers.’ The Butt of the joke can also be the Teller, the Audience, or both when the joke is self-ironising. However, Purdie clarifies that when the Butt ‘involves actual targets, joking constructs these as not fully members of the community of proper speakers, and this involves complex and often strong feelings towards them.’<sup>6</sup> According to Purdie’s definition, comedy based upon a sense of superiority could be aggressive and hostile, but equally it could be self-ironising.

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4 Purdie, p. 66.

5 Purdie, p. 14.

6 Purdie, p. 58.

I return to self-ironising comedy in the ‘Laughing through the Tears’ section, in which the Butts of the jokes are often also the ethnic-minority Tellers, mocking themselves to create what Purdie describes as a resultant ‘delicious intimacy’ between Teller and Audience.<sup>7</sup> This ‘gentle’ comedy begins to open a gap between the normativity and superiority that threaten to overlap in racist and/or sexist comedy. Marie Gillespie indicates the community-building potential of jokes by suggesting that ‘those who share a joke belong to a community, however temporary, of people alike enough in outlook and feeling to be joined in sharing a joke.’<sup>8</sup> This demonstrates why comedy is invaluable for redrawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion involved in notions of Britishness. But no matter how momentarily unifying a joking exchange can be, I will not pretend that cultural self-mockery and the exploitation of stereotypes is unproblematic. Using features of one’s identity drawn from ethnic difference or stereotype as the Butt of a joke is a problem of ‘gentle’ comedy that I return to in my critique of the first wave of comic films.

### **Incongruity Theory**

Comedy based on incongruity is used to undermine orthodoxies and upturn hierarchies. John Morreall sees comedy arising from incongruity as the result of living ‘in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn’t fit into these patterns.’<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival highlights the political implications of this form of comedy. In *Rabelais and his World* (1965),

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<sup>7</sup> Purdie, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Marie Gillespie, ‘From Comic Asians to Asian Comics: *Goodness Gracious Me*, British Television Comedy and Representations of Ethnicity’, in *Group Identities on French and British Television*, ed. by Michael Scriven and Emily Roberts (New York: Berghahn, 2003), pp. 93-107 (p. 93).

<sup>9</sup> John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), p. 16.

Bakhtin states that ‘carnival is the people’s second life, organised on the basis of laughter.’<sup>10</sup> This ‘second life’ – comparable to the medieval Feast of Fools or modern-day Mardi Gras – is one of overturned hierarchies, celebration, and the suspension of rules and social conventions. Bakhtin understands carnival as celebrating ‘temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order’ and ‘mark[ing] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.’<sup>11</sup> This theory suggests that the laughter provoked by carnival has a purpose, as boundaries between the sacred and profane are (temporarily) removed and institutions lose their power.

The political reasons for laughter induced in this manner are decidedly ironic: the existence of a ‘second life’ implies a ‘first life’ – of toil, hardship or enslavement – that the ‘people’ must be reconciled to (we might think of laughter as a kind of soma).<sup>12</sup> But although this suspension of social norms might be temporary, the psychological effects are more enduring, as once something has been degraded through laughter it somewhat loses its semblance of power. Comedy does not pave the way for any real political revolution and I would argue that the carnivalesque is rather more placatory than Bakhtin suggests. Yet as outlined above, it does have the capacity to change *conceptions* of power and hierarchical social norms, a distinction that I will return to later.

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<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin, p. 198.

<sup>11</sup> Bakhtin, p. 199.

<sup>12</sup> In Aldous Huxley’s novel *Brave New World*, the socially condoned and rationed drug ‘soma’ is used to give citizens temporary relief from the monotony of their work, ultimately reconciling them to it and making them better, more placid workers, who in their chemically-numbed state are less prone to any revolutionary action. See Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 2004).

I cannot analyse the films using the same understanding of carnivalesque incongruity as Bakhtin. For him, carnival laughter is inclusive: it ‘expresses the point of view of the whole world’ and ‘he who is laughing also belongs to it.’<sup>13</sup> There is no outside to carnival laughter and, as such, everyone is implicated in the ridiculous world with its laughable hierarchies. Film audiences, however, are not necessarily implicated in the incongruities that take place on the screen, meaning that laughter can be potentially more hostile. During my analysis I shall therefore bear in mind where the viewer is being placed in relation to the spectacle on screen, so as to consider whether the laughter engendered is inclusive – laughing at a shared and ineffective political system or putative national ideal – or exclusive, laughing from a particular side of a constructed hierarchy.

Furthermore, it is important to note that incongruity is not always a cause for laughter. To clarify why this is the case it helps to consider comedy’s traditional counterpart: tragedy. Andrew Stott defines the two genres via reference to the audience’s required emotional attachment: ‘[i]f it is generically appropriate for tragedy to ask us to be sensible of human suffering, then comedy [...] allows us to stand back and look upon human misfortune from an emotional distance, sometimes even deriving great pleasure from it.’<sup>14</sup> This suggests that the potential for humour is a matter of perspective rather than an essential quality of events. In their introduction to *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein suggest that one of the most pertinent examples of incongruity failing to equate to comedy is the case of postcolonialism itself, arguing that ‘[t]he relationship between the former coloniser and the former colonised is [...] an example of a fundamentally non-

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<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), p. 12.

humorous disparity,' being 'fundamentally inequitable.' They conclude that a range of postcolonial comic modes variously 'reflect a struggle for agency, an imbalance of power, and a need, a desire, for release.'<sup>15</sup> The 'release' that the critics refer to is presumably release from the legacies of the colonial period, though they do not make this entirely clear.

Whilst I would argue that postcolonial comedy does indeed have the potential to encourage laughter at residual incongruities of the colonial period by mocking ridiculous stereotypes that bear little or no resemblance to reality, the postcolonial comedies that I consider go further than this. They also question more recent fears and stereotypes that have arisen out of specific political 'events' such as 9/11 and 7/7, or out of classist anxieties about risks associated with deprived socio-economic groups.<sup>16</sup> Constructions of otherness shift to reflect current concerns (of the suicide bomber or the gangster, for example) rather than being perennially embedded in former colonial ties. This attests to the adaptability of postcolonial texts and criticism for challenging neo-imperialism as well as its colonial counterpart.

### **Relief Theory**

The final and most relevant theory of comedy – in relation to constructions of desire and my thesis as a whole – is constructed around its function as relief or release. Over a century ago Sigmund Freud articulated his belief in joking as the momentary overcoming of inhibitions, in 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' (1905).

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<sup>15</sup> Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, 'Introduction', in *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, ed. by Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 1-23 (p. 9).

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida repeatedly refers to 9/11 as an 'event.' See Jacques Derrida, 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida', in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 85-136.

The connections Freud makes between the teller and the recipient of jokes are crucial, as the latter ‘must be able as a matter of habit to erect in himself the same inhibition which the first person’s joke has overcome, so that, as soon as he hears the joke, the readiness for this inhibition will compulsively or automatically awaken.’ Drawn to its logical conclusion this implies that in order for a joke to provoke laughter, the audience must be familiar with the inhibitions that are being overcome, or the taboos that the joke gives voice to. An effective joke is, in Freud’s terms, ‘evidence of far-reaching psychical conformity.’<sup>17</sup> Whilst Freud’s notion of joking appears to me flawed for relying wholly upon a supposedly ‘involuntary’ nature that he likens to dreaming – thereby crucially failing to consider occasions when jokes are deliberately constructed – his groundwork on the social and psychological function of jokes remains relevant.

### **Postcolonial Comedy**

So far I have illustrated three main theories of comedy and related their functions to postcolonialism. Now I turn to Homi Bhabha, who has explicitly conceptualised the ambivalent uses of comedy for colonial and postcolonial purposes. Bhabha highlights the importance that comedy has had for advancing and justifying the progress of colonialism, stating ‘[i]f colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce.’<sup>18</sup> Yet he goes on to illustrate methods for comically undermining colonial authority, through both an engagement with stereotypes and via the subversive use of mimicry. I have outlined Bhabha’s theorisation of the stereotype regarding its relation to Gothic and modes of othering in the previous chapter (in subsection “‘I *am* the others’”: Embodying the Monstrous

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<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 151.

<sup>18</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 85.

Other’). I will now focus on the importance of engaging with stereotypes rather than simply dismissing them as false. For Bhabha, ‘[t]o judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its *effectivity*.’<sup>19</sup> It is only through understanding the workings of stereotypes that they might be displaced or lose their power. An engagement with the effectivity of stereotypes is enabled in postcolonial comedy as the stereotypes are employed reflexively in order to provoke ironic laughter.

Freud suggests that the essence of irony lies in ‘saying the opposite of what one intends to convey to the other person’; he goes on to emphasise that ‘[i]rony can only be employed when the other person is prepared to hear the opposite, so that he cannot fail to feel an inclination to contradict.’<sup>20</sup> Therefore, when irony is employed a certain audience is assumed, and for the irony to function the audience must also have certain preconceptions about the teller of the joke. This joking paradigm is frequently deployed in postcolonial comedy: in the mouths of actors from ethnic minority backgrounds, stereotypes seem absurd and the audience is forced to interpret performances drawing on cultural stereotypes as ironic. A comical engagement with stereotypes also has the potential to unmask the lack on which Bhabha suggests that they are constructed, unveiling fears or anxieties that are simultaneously contained and revealed by the anxious repetition of the stereotype.<sup>21</sup>

Bhabha also discusses mimicry as an ultimately ineffective strategy that has nevertheless been employed to fix images of the Other in colonial discourse. The

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<sup>19</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p. 174.

<sup>21</sup> Bhabha notes that stereotypes are ‘always already known’ yet have to be ‘anxiously repeated.’ *Location of Culture*, p. 66.

desire for colonised subjects to mimic their colonising counterparts stems from ‘the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.*’ This means, for Bhabha, that ‘the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.’<sup>22</sup> As such, mimicry spills over into mockery, ‘which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.’<sup>23</sup> Mimicry belies the authenticity and authority assumed by colonial rule, as the (former) colonial centre sees its image distortedly reflected and thereby undermined.<sup>24</sup>

Yet there is a problem of agency in Bhabha’s construction, as it suggests that the mimicking/mocking subject is the inevitable result of colonial discourse. Whilst this deftly exposes the inherently flawed means employed in the service of colonisation, it also colludes with colonial discourse by ignoring any agency on the part of the colonised subject. By contrast, the mockery and parody enacted in the films that I examine is self-aware and often self-reflexive in its mockery. Contemporary postcolonial comedy is able to hold British ideals up to a mirror and show them lacking, but asserts the agency of minority characters, rather than figuring them as passive outworkings of a postcolonial condition.

### **Comedy and Film**

I use films as opposed to novels for the purpose of considering postcolonial comedy, first and foremost for the reason that film is the most frequently consumed medium of enjoying postcolonial comedy. Yet there are also stylistic motivations for my choice.

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<sup>22</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 86.

<sup>23</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 89.

Stereotyping is largely involved in the *spectacle* of difference, as racial stereotypes are often attached to physical markers – what Fanon describes as being ‘overdetermined from without’ – making visual media a more appropriate forum.<sup>25</sup> Mimicry and mockery are similarly matters of performance, better suited to visual media. Finally, positionality and audience are important factors pertaining to an understanding of comedy, and directorial choices made in the production of film, such as camera angles, framing and perspective, are useful means of judging the way that audiences are being positioned.

Comedy is traditionally a dramatic form and its humour often relies on the ability to direct an audience to view events in a particular way: to frame them as comic rather than tragic, as I demonstrated above. I therefore recognise that theatre is a curious omission from this study. In justification I return to the point I made regarding the greater consumption and accessibility of films in comparison to theatre that one might have to travel miles to see, and then only on specific occasions. Furthermore, in a very useful overview of British Asian theatre, Giovanna Buonnano, Victoria Sams and Christine Schlote highlight “‘humorous appeasement” (that is, the deconstruction of Western stereotypes with non-confrontational humour),’ as a ‘dominant generic choice.’<sup>26</sup> Though the role of humorous appeasement is something I shall discuss in relation to the first wave of ‘gentle’ postcolonial British comedies, I have not to date found a theatrical correlative for the shocking and outrageous second wave of films.

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<sup>25</sup> Fanon, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> Giovanna Buonnano, Victoria Sams and Christine Schlote, ‘Glocal Routes in British Asian Drama: Between Adaptation and Tradaptation’, *Postcolonial Text*, 6.2 (2011) <<http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1259/1161>> [accessed 11 June 2012], p. 8.

As I have not focussed on reception theory in the novels that I have previously discussed, neither will I in relation to the films. There is a vast array of websites and magazines that engage with audience responses, but having trawled through many of them it became evident that their essentially subjective nature and function as marketing tools meant that they often failed to engage with specific comic strategies or political messages deployed in the films.<sup>27</sup>

### **‘Trust an immigrant not to play the game’: Irreverent Comedy in *The Satanic Verses***

Though for the remainder of this chapter the focus will be on films, I will nevertheless open my discussion of comic strategies via *The Satanic Verses*, both on account of its exploration of comic means, modes, and sites of attack, and of its cinematic qualities.<sup>28</sup> Whilst the novel relies on words alone to transmit comic effect, the comedy often depends on visual aspects that the reader must imagine, indicating its suitability to the screen.

The scene below illustrates how the novel would lend itself beautifully to film, where cinematic tools could be used to heighten the comic effect. Following the teasing

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<sup>27</sup> What I found even more problematic was the way that John Boyega (who takes the lead as Moses in *Attack the Block*) was often called upon in interview to comment on the riots in London that coincided with the film’s release, attributing a veneer of authenticity to the actor despite his comparative economic privilege and removal from the actual events, as he was touring America at the time. See, for example the *Youtube* clip at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ADE1Ms166w>> [accessed 18 November 2012]. I address problems associated with claims to authenticity at greater length in the next chapter.

<sup>28</sup> A consideration of *The Satanic Verses* in terms of its filmic qualities is also supported by the vocation of its two protagonists, both of whom are actors: Gibreel as a movie star in Indian films and Saladin as a voice artist for cartoons and advertisements. It follows that readers are encouraged to think of the characters in terms of performativity, artifice and (re)presentation. However, I shall dwell on these aspects in more detail in the next chapter.

mutual seduction of Rekha Merchant, wealthy wife of an Indian carpet magnate, and the film star Gibreel Farishta:

[I]t didn't take long for her to touch his lips and deliquesce into his arms. By the time her children returned from school with the ayah she was immaculately dressed and coiffed, and sat with him in the drawing-room, revealing the secrets of the carpet-business, confessing that art silk stood for artificial not artistic, telling him not to be fooled by her brochure in which a rug was seductively described as being made of wool plucked from the throats of baby lambs, which means, you see, only *low-grade wool*, advertising, what to do, this is how it is. (26-27)

The humour of this scene is supplied by our imaginative visual reconstruction of the scenario, in which the mood of sensuous abandon implied by the euphemistic and sibilant language of the opening sentence plunges bathetically to the matter-of-fact subject matter of the denouement. Any lingering sense of sensual abandon is swiftly stifled by means of the literary equivalent of a jump cut that shows Rekha as transformed into an image of maternal and marital correctness. Yet the enduring sexual tension, made apparent in Rushdie's narrative through a choice of suggestive (ad)verbs ('revealing', 'confessing', 'seductively'), indicates a comic gap between the morally 'immaculate' appearance and a repressed erotic subtext. This could be visually exaggerated through gesture, lighting, soft focus, music or carefully selected camera angles were it a scene in a film.

Furthermore, Rushdie's novel at times focalises the narrative as if through a camera, forcing readers to acknowledge the way that a camera's positions and omissions can structure our understanding of an event. During the novel's coverage of the

‘Brickhall’ riots the action is described according to the ostensibly ambivalent gaze of the television camera, showing only ‘what a television camera sees’ (454).<sup>29</sup> In this manner, the novel draws attention to the point of view of the readers, and the way that it can be manipulated to produce a misleading story. The way that perspective can be controlled is more apparent in the visual medium to which Rushdie appeals than its literary equivalent. What this scene enables is a critique of media constructions of fear, through selective shots and an inability to ‘understand, or demonstrate, what any of this achieves’ (455). Readers are forced to consider the person behind the camera who is directing and manipulating our gaze. The media construction of fear is something that I discuss later in this chapter in relation to its parody in *Four Lions* and *Attack the Block*.<sup>30</sup>

I turn now to the crucial role that *The Satanic Verses* has played in shaping subsequent postcolonial British comedy in terms of its positionality, daring and irreverent critique. The title quotation for this chapter, ‘pitting levity against gravity’ (3) is taken from the novel’s opening scene, in which the abstract nouns adopt their literal sense to describe Gibreel’s attempts at thwarting the force of gravity during his plummet towards the English Channel by ‘spread-eagling himself’ and ‘adopting heraldic postures’ (3). However, the quotation can also serve as a metaphor for Rushdie’s comic style (levity) and serious subject matter (including the ‘grave’ matters of the racist treatment of immigrants in Britain, the formative years of Islam, and terrorism).

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<sup>29</sup> The ‘Brickhall’ riots are fictional but draw upon and implicitly critique heavily-policed riots in Brixton and Southall during the early 1980s.

<sup>30</sup> *Four Lions*, dir. by Chris Morris (Film4, 2010); *Attack The Block*, dir. by Joe Cornish (Studio Canal Features Film4, 2011).

Amidst debate surrounding the fatwa, Rushdie's novel was discussed so seriously (or with such gravity) that its status as a work of comedy has been somewhat overlooked, though I will consider the issue of tone later. This might in part be due to the nature of comedy itself, and its decreasing potential for humour the more it is explained. Rushdie's primary comic weapon is satire, which John Clement Ball describes as 'the quintessential form of "othering."' Ball elaborates that '[i]t is not usually in the interests of satiric rhetoric to play fair by articulating the causes or conditions that might contextualize a particular (mis)representation; explaining too much weakens the satire's bite.'<sup>31</sup> Yet Rushdie's satire caused such offence that he was pressured into spending a lot of time 'articulating the causes and conditions' for his satirical attack.

However, the lengths Ball goes to in order to describe the workings and direction of Rushdie's satire suggests that it is worth critical consideration. He defines Rushdie's style as 'pessoptimist,' a term borrowed from Edward Said and employed to explain both the aggressive/negative satire and the Menippean (grotesque yet regenerative) satire that he finds to be simultaneously at work in Rushdie's fiction. Reading *The Satanic Verses* within a Bakhtinian framework, Ball explains the Menippean satire in terms of 'the grotesque body: the ingesting, defecating, urinating, fornicating body of the open apertures, where the physiological self proclaims its incompleteness by flowing into and out of the world,' concluding that '[t]his conception of the unfinished body [...] challenges the bourgeois ego's self-image of containment and completion. Instead it stresses change, renewal, and fertility.'<sup>32</sup> The potential for transformation and renewal that Ball locates in Rushdie's Menippean satire is poignant when considering what it is that the novel's comedy enables.

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<sup>31</sup> John Clement Ball, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel: V. S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> John Clement Ball, p. 120.

Saladin's transformation undermines the fixity necessary for stereotypes to function effectively. Finding himself to have unfortunately acquired a goatish, devilish appearance, his body becomes the very picture of the grotesque and the following description shows a definite predilection for the workings of the 'lower stratum' that Bakhtin identifies as the site of degradation and subsequent renewal<sup>33</sup>:

His thighs had grown uncommonly wide and powerful, as well as hairy. Below the knee the hairiness came to a halt, and his legs narrowed into tough, bony, almost fleshless calves, terminating in a pair of shiny, cloven hooves, such as one might find on any billy-goat. Saladin was also taken aback by the sight of his phallus, greatly enlarged and embarrassingly erect, an organ that he had the greatest difficulty in acknowledging as his own. (157)

Saladin's body subsequently becomes the 'defecating [...] body of the open apertures,' as he is horrified to find himself defecating uncontrollably in a police van.<sup>34</sup> Without a Bakhtinian understanding of the situation, the incident would be horribly bleak – recall, if you will, my earlier discussion regarding the interchangeability of comedy and tragedy according to perspective – as Saladin soon finds that he has been transformed in this manner due to 'the power of description' of his racist captors (168).

But rather than the 'fixity' that the stereotype's power relies upon, Saladin's is a body in flux, altering and transforming constantly.<sup>35</sup> Not only does his transformation challenge what Ball has termed 'the bourgeois ego's self-image of containment and

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<sup>33</sup> Bakhtin, p. 206.

<sup>34</sup> John Clement Ball, p. 120.

<sup>35</sup> For further discussion on the workings of the stereotype see Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 66.

completion,' it also appropriates the stereotype as a site of struggle, incompleteness and potential transformation.<sup>36</sup> As Saladin embodies a stereotype based on racist fears of animality and hyper-sexuality in the 'black' man's body, its changing and decidedly unfixed nature exposes the weak foundations on which the stereotype is built.<sup>37</sup> An engagement with racist stereotypes is something that continues to be important for the films that I discuss, and the embodiment of stereotypes is one of the ways in which they continue to be challenged.

A Bakhtinian reading of *The Satanic Verses* usefully accounts for the subversive yet regenerative employment of Menippean satire. The opening up of the body to the world, depicting it as a material rather than a spiritual vessel, is chiefly enabled in the novel by the debasement of figures of spiritual or national ideals through their sexualisation, and a focus, once again, on the 'lower stratum.' I will analyse two such incidents below to indicate how the sacred and the profane are brought into uncomfortable proximity in Rushdie's novel, acting as a form of ideological levelling in which supposedly ideal subjects are humanised by removing them from pedestals and figuring them instead as symbols of regeneration and possibility.

The first – and most controversial – of the examples that I offer, occurs second in the novel, and concerns the mimicry by the poet Baal and his harem of 'whores' of Mahound (the novel's version of the Prophet Muhammad) and his wives. In the early days of 'Submission' (meaning Islam) in Jahilia (meaning ignorance), *The Satanic Verses* describes an increased appetite for brothels and a heightened interest in the

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<sup>36</sup> John Clement Ball, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> For a more detailed discussion of fears projected onto Black masculinity, see Frantz Fanon's chapter on 'The Negro and Psychopathology' in *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 100-48.

Prophet's recently secluded wives. Filling this gap in the market, the whores of 'The Curtain' (a translation of *hijab*) each adopt one of the wives' identities. This instance of mimicry operates on a number of levels: there is a queue to the brothel that rotates 'about its centrally positioned Fountain of Love much as pilgrims rotated for other reasons around the ancient Black Stone' (381); the whores marry the poet Baal, who thereby mimics Mahound/Mohammed; and the harem begins to mirror the 'political cliques at the Yathrib mosque' (382). As the residents of 'The Curtain' mimic the appearance and nexus of relationships between the prophet and his wives, the scenario also produces what Bhabha might term 'its slippage, its excess, its difference' by focussing on the sexual relationships of the characters, which sink as low as the necrophilic acts pretended on the whore impersonating Zainab-bint-Khuzaimah, the recently deceased wife of the prophet (382).<sup>38</sup> This ambiguity between the 'original' and the bawdy copy creates ambivalence that challenges the Prophet's authority. By means of 'that anti-mosque, that labyrinth of profanity' (383), the sacred nature of the Prophet's character loses some of its power by contagion. This could be read as an instance of negative satire, rendering the Prophet seedy by comparison and portraying the veiling of women in Islam as a cynical means of sexual enticement. However, by using an earlier section from the novel as a point of comparison, I argue that it could equally illustrate a transformative potential inherent in Islam.

Previously in the novel, the British Queen has been presented as the sexual fantasy of Saladin Chamcha. During his recovery in the 'mysterious institution' (167), Saladin:

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<sup>38</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 86.

[F]ound himself dreaming of the Queen, of making tender love to the monarch. She was the body of Britain, the avatar of the State, and he had chosen her, joined with her; she was his Beloved, the moon of his delight. (169)

The vocabulary of this fantasy is comparable to Renaissance sonnets: proclamations of idealised and euphemistic love written to unobtainable women, of which recipients at the time included the first Queen Elizabeth. However, the sentence immediately following this fantasy brings about a bathetic plunge from Saladin's lofty ideals to the leaky and open body: 'Hyacinth came at the appointed times to ride and pummel him, and he submitted without any fuss' (169). Taken out of context, as we are encouraged to given the preceding sentence, this appears as a lewd depiction of the sexual act. In matter of fact, the pummelling and riding are part of the process of loosening the excess phlegm from the patient's lungs. Read in or out of context, the overall effect of this paragraph is to force into proximity the idealised figure of the Queen and the grotesque profanity of the sick or copulating human body; the idealised status of the monarch is contaminated by association. Yet in Bakhtinian terms, this figures the Queen's body as a site of renewal and transformation, as the quotation explicitly links the Queen's corporeal body with that of the national body. By implication, I would argue that the image is employed to show the potential for the fertile 'body politic' to be transformed, to be considered not closed and complete but open to seduction by its migrant peoples, of which Saladin is a member.

Returning to the question of the satirical representation of the Prophet and his wives, Ball presents a similar argument, tentatively suggesting that 'one might argue that Rushdie is not so much carnivalizing Islam as inscribing attributes of a polyphonic Islamic culture that already exist, but that are increasingly threatened by the faith's

more fundamentalist adherents.’ According to this argument it would appear that by satirising the Prophet, Rushdie denies a singular, closed and untouchable story, thereby restoring Islam to a former ‘polyphony’ and breathing new life into the faith.<sup>39</sup> Whether Rushdie is successful in this form of satire, however, is debateable, and as Ball surmises: ‘[c]an anything written by a single author, especially one as opinionated as Rushdie, ever really *be* multiplicitous? Or is an authored text always a will to power that can only represent multiplicity from a position of authority?’<sup>40</sup>

I have been deliberately selective with quotations drawn from *The Satanic Verses* in order to convey the complex range of interpretations available by a close examination of individual passages. However, this careful selection may also render me guilty of obfuscating the overall tone of the novel and too neatly explaining away the offence it engendered. Whilst individual sections give the satire its confusing ‘multidirectionality’ and arguably regenerative polyphony, the overall thrust of the novel serves as a prolonged and wholly irreverent character defamation of the Prophet Mohammad.

During the early days of the ‘Rushdie Affair,’ Tariq Modood argued that the novel’s irreverent style was the real cause of hurt for Muslims at the time. The novel ‘was not objected to as an intellectual critique of their faith (libraries are full of those),’ but the ‘vulgar language, the explicit sexual imagery, the attribution of lustful motives – without any evidence – to the holy Prophet, in short the reduction of their religion to a selfish and sexual appetite’ was the real cause of offence. Modood concludes that the novel ‘was no more a contribution to literary discourse than pissing upon the Bible is

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<sup>39</sup> It is for this kind of reason that Sara Suleri terms it a ‘deeply Islamic book.’ Suleri, p. 222.

<sup>40</sup> John Clement Ball, pp. 153, 154.

a theological argument.’<sup>41</sup> Intention is hard to discern in the case of *The Satanic Verses*, not least due to the mixed responses given by Rushdie himself during the ‘Affair.’<sup>42</sup> However, the response to the novel’s publication from minority groups forces me to question how useful a ‘postcolonial’ novel is that serves to retrench polarities and dredge up Orientalist stereotypes.

But if, as Bhabha suggests, stereotypes must be engaged with in order to expose their effectivity, authors and directors alike are forced to tread a precarious line between exploring the damaging power of stereotypes and simply reproducing the original offence.<sup>43</sup> *The Satanic Verses* foregrounds the necessary work of engaging with stereotypes through the character Jumpy Joshi, who poetically concerns himself with ‘reclaim[ing] the metaphor’ (186) of ‘rivers of blood,’ an evocative image that was employed during a xenophobic speech delivered by Enoch Powell.<sup>44</sup> This highlights the necessity of deconstructing and breathing new life into threatening or damaging associations and denying racist perpetrators the sole right to shaping national discourse. But although the novel’s comedy provides a sound satire of postcolonial Britain, challenging racist and right-wing discourses, when it comes to Islam the object of satire is confused, meaning, as Lindsey Moore asserts, that the novel ‘paradoxically [...] reinforce[s] the line it challenges.’<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Tariq Modood, ‘British Asian Muslims and the Rushdie Affair’, *Political Quarterly*, 61.2 (1990), 143-60 (p. 154).

<sup>42</sup> See further Rushdie’s essays ‘In God We Trust,’ ‘In Good Faith,’ ‘Is Nothing Sacred’ and ‘One Thousand Days in a Balloon’ in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 376-92, 393-414, 415-29, 430-39.

<sup>43</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> Enoch Powell, ‘Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” Speech’, *The Telegraph*, 6 November 2007 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html>> [accessed 21 March 2011].

<sup>45</sup> Lindsey Moore, ‘Special Issue: Glocal Imaginaries: Preface’, *Postcolonial Text*, 6.2 (2011) <[postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/download/1323/1169](http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/download/1323/1169)> [accessed 18 November 2012], 1-7 (p. 4).

Changes in contemporaneous politics engender shifting causes for laughter and present new challenges for the negotiation of both state-endorsed ideologies and aspirations, and evolving public attitudes. The next section will move from a conservative, Thatcherite Britain that witnessed calls for the repatriation of migrants, to the Blairite ideals and official party-line policy of multiculturalism. This is not to suggest that racism ended with the decline of Thatcher's government, but rather that the official political environment shifted and brought about new species of comedy to suit the times.

### **Laughing through the Tears**

In a letter to Gurinder Chadha, former Prime Minister Tony Blair proclaimed his love for the film *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), 'because it represented his Britain, a very diverse, multi-cultural Britain.'<sup>46</sup> As such this film (and its enthusiastic mainstream reception) is emblematic of a Blairite political climate that ostentatiously claimed to celebrate multiculturalism. Alongside *Bend It Like Beckham*, this section will discuss *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and *East is East* (1999) as films that encourage what I have termed 'laughter through the tears.'<sup>47</sup> By this I refer to a type of emotive 'feel good' comedy that is based around inclusivity and purportedly universal ideals.

As opposed to the shocking or satirically-astute comedy observed in *The Satanic Verses* and films that I discuss in the next section, the comedy examined here is comparatively mild, or as I shall subsequently term it 'gentle.' The comedy does not

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<sup>46</sup> Gurinder Chadha in interview with Claudia Sternberg, in Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg, *Bidding for the Mainstream? Black and Asian British Film since the 1990s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 246.

<sup>47</sup> *Bend It Like Beckham*, dir. by Gurinder Chadha (Kintop Films, 2002); *Bhaji on the Beach*, dir. by Gurinder Chadha (Film4, 1993); *East is East*, dir. by Damien O'Donnell (Film4, 1999).

present a controversial object of attack, but instead displaces social inequities to the recent past or prioritises ‘universal’ issues of inter-generational strife or sexism. Any sense of contemporary inequality or prejudice is papered over in the name of optimistic multiculturalism to the extent that though I would term them postcolonial comedies, they have often done more to offend the migrant communities concerned than to critique racially-motivated injustice in contemporary society. I do not want to critique the utopian *vision* of a society with no outsiders that the comedies attempt to create, but rather to draw attention to those that *are*, by necessity, excluded from the vision.

One means of portraying a more inclusive contemporary society is to displace racist attitudes onto the past and thereby find comedy in a bygone way of life. Damien O’Donnell’s *East is East* (1999) – based on a play by Ayub Khan-Din – is set in 1971. This temporal remove potentially weakens the relevance of any social critique enabled by the film, although by satirising Enoch Powell and his supporters the finger is clearly pointed at those who still harbour racist prejudices. O’Donnell’s film is set in Salford, and takes as its focus a Pakistani immigrant, George Khan, with his white British wife and their seven children. George Khan (‘Genghis’ to his children, on account of both the shared name and his authoritative tendencies) faces an uphill battle trying to force his children to conform to his traditional Pakistani/Muslim values, as his wife watches on and intercedes on their behalf when she sees fit. The plot revolves around a spectrum of culturally stereotypical family dramas, which leads Ali Nobil to claim that *‘East is East* invites us to enjoy a film about Asians in Britain in terms of what it likes best: arranged marriages, domestic violence and

oppression.’<sup>48</sup> However, whilst the film may use dubious means to draw an audience (during the marketing phase ‘the distributor refrained from depicting Asian characters on the major promotion posters in anticipation that such “obvious” ethnic labelling might limit the film’s audience appeal’), it does invite a criticism of overtly racist figures like Powell.<sup>49</sup>

Though many of George’s efforts to bring his children up in the Muslim faith are mocked or undermined, his reminder to Tariq that in Islam everyone is equal, ‘no black or white’ resounds as a happy alternative to the backdrop of politically-endorsed intolerance that is evident in their surrounding Salford estate. The majority of intercultural friendships and relationships that the film presents are shown to be happy, mutual and tolerant but Mr Moorhouse plays the part of neighbourhood representative for Powellite ideology. This is most evident in a scene during which the tomboyish Meenah Khan kicks a football through a window that displays a poster of Powell himself. As the children run away with screams and laughter, Mr Moorhouse’s face appears at the window in the space previously occupied by Powell’s head. A timely close-up reveals his futile anger. The shot that frames the poster visually resembles a childish ‘your face here’ attraction to be found in fairgrounds, comically undermining the anger expressed by Mr Moorhouse via the incongruity of the juxtaposed images of childish amusement and adult rage; he is rendered incapable of achieving his intended effect. Furthermore, the switching of Powell’s head for Mr Moorhouse’s visually marks him as Powell’s (lone) stand-in on the street. The image effectively blurs the boundaries between mimicry and mockery that Bhabha identifies as pertinent to

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<sup>48</sup> Ali Nabil, ‘Is East...East?’, *Third Text*, 49 (1999/2000), 105-7 (p. 105).

<sup>49</sup> Korte and Sternberg, p. 11.

challenging authority, by replacing Powell's face with its comically ineffectual representative.

Powell's impotence is further demonstrated by the Khan children's refusal to take his message seriously, thereby undermining his assumption of power. Whilst watching a televised racist speech by Powell with his siblings, Saleem jokes, 'we can have a whip round and get Dad repatriated,' and in doing so reinterprets Powell's words as comical opportunity rather than intended threat. In another instance, Earnest Moorhouse embarrasses his Grandfather by innocently greeting Mr Khan with a 'salaam alaikum' within the former's earshot whilst he is sermonising on the detrimental effects of immigrants ('You let one of 'em in, and the whole fuckin' tribe turns up'). This has the effect of exposing Mr Moorhouse's views as archaic and outdated. His own teenage granddaughter is having a relationship with Tariq Khan, whilst Earnest is friends with Sajid and infatuated with Meenah, illustrating that for the younger generation (even eighteen years before the film is released) the norm is tolerant multiculturalism rather than intolerance and racism.

However, *East is East* is often problematic in its use of comedy to other values that emanate from outside white majority culture. Religion (specifically Islam) is figured as a concern solely of the older generation, through the presentation of a purely superficial Muslim identity for all but one of the Khan children and a lot of screen-time devoted to the spectacle of watching them unwillingly dress up for Nazir's wedding. Their traditional Muslim dress is depicted as masking their chosen identities: Meenah pulls off her headscarf every time elders' heads are turned in a comically childlike act of disobedience, and Sajid is never seen without his Parka

which, unlike the *taqiyah*, is seen as an integral part of his identity. The fact that the children largely opt for different lifestyles to their father is not problematic in itself. However, the representation of George as violent, hypocritical and bigamous – often shot from low angles to show him looming over his cowering wife or beaten children – serves to demonise George’s religious views by association with their tyrannical and ruthless practitioner.

Furthermore, *East is East* presents racism itself in a curious way, as both Tariq and Sajid refer to Pakistani friends and relatives as ‘Pakis’ in a derogatory manner that constitutes a form of othering. It is clear when they make these proclamations that they do not include themselves in the term, with Tariq explicitly identifying as British *not* Pakistani. This could be read as an implicit critique of a society that encourages the internalisation of racist values amongst migrant communities, provoking laughter at the strange incongruity of a Pakistani-British boy appropriating the term. But I would argue that the way other Pakistanis in the film are constructed – through dress, ideals and often accent or language – as different to the Khan children, actually encourages superiority-induced laughter at the Other who has not assimilated in the same way.

I will not discuss at length the film’s later partner-piece, *West is West* (2010), as it is largely set in Pakistan rather than Britain, but it does take up Sajid’s internalised racism in a noteworthy manner.<sup>50</sup> After calling his father a ‘Paki’, he is taken to Pakistan to learn respect for his father’s country and culture; however, the film fails to address the root cause of the racism, which lies in the bullying that he undergoes at

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<sup>50</sup> *West is West*, dir. by Andy De Emmony (Assassin Films, 2010).

school. As such, Sajid's internalised racism is seen as a problem to be dealt with in the individual rather than the society. Sajid learns about Pakistani culture so that he can be proud of it, but the bullies go unpunished.

The two films are problematic in their call for assimilation by migrants rather than a mutual process of becoming that also involves work on the part of white British culture. However, the films do enable a critical reflection on processes of ethnic commodification and exoticisation.<sup>51</sup> *East is East* reaches a climax when the Shahs (with whom marriages have been furtively arranged) visit the Khans. As the door is shut to the Khans' residence, Earnest Moorhouse is shown peering through their window before the camera cuts to a scene in the living room, thereby positioning the audience as nosey white spectators.

Similarly, in *West is West* the tendency to exoticise is parodied as Tariq plays up stereotypes of Pakistan by talking about his father's spirituality ('he's practically Gandhi') in order to chat up a blonde girl and sell her his wares. Made up words like 'transen-tit-ises', accompanied by the mixing of religious signifiers (his father is Muslim not Hindu) trigger laughter at Tariq's failure to conform to an exotic, Orientalist stereotype, when he is exposed as a fraud by his laughing younger brother. This also implicitly serves to mock those that seek to exoticise the East, such as Sajid's school teacher, Mr Jordan, who is the embodiment of academic Orientalism in the film.

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<sup>51</sup> I will return to the topics of commodification and exoticisation in the next chapter.

Whilst O'Donnell's film mocks racist ideologies, Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* depicts a gentle self-mockery of the South Asian community represented. During the film, a traditional English holiday to Blackpool is given an ethnic twist as the Saheli Women's Group take a minibus from Birmingham to the tune of a Punjabi version of Cliff Richard's 'Summer Holiday.' Through the course of the day a number of the women have their views challenged or comically undermined.

Much of the film's comedy relies on undermining prejudiced characters by suggesting that they have lost a grip on reality. This means that audiences are positioned to laugh at anything the prejudiced characters say. The film opens with a very realist establishing sequence, during which the camera pans slowly down a graffitied and rundown street. Mysterious music then serves to offer an alternative to the realist image, as the camera appears to enter the dark void of a shop door. The scene cuts to an image of the Hindu god Ram shot from a low angle to signify his power, followed by a shot of Asha from the point of view of Ram, illustrating her comparative submission. A sequence of brass interjections accompany a series of jumpy camera cuts and lend a sense of drama as Asha looks around the visions presented to her. An aerial shot shows her turning confusedly down a corridor walled with oversized images of Hindi film posters and Western consumer products like Coca Cola, Cadburys and Golden Wonder, ending with Ram and the contrapuntal sound of a voice saying 'Asha! Know your place!' At this point, the vision ends and Asha is left standing in front of a dropped tray of food and incense sticks that she was about to place in front of the image of Ram in her shop. The bathetic plunge from the spiritual to the mundane tasks of running a shop and preparing breakfast serves to poke fun at a woman who seems ill equipped to deal with her quotidian reality. By highlighting

Asha's loose grip on reality, she is undermined in her subsequent efforts to castigate the younger generation for their worldly ways. Indeed, immediately following the opening scene with Asha, the camera cuts to Ginder, who is shown reading the divorce papers that serve as an index of her practical response to situations.

Asha's visions are used to portray her construction of the world through stereotypes, but playing these images in a non-realist dimension conflates prejudice with madness. Upon finding out that teenage Hashida has become pregnant outside of marriage, Asha has a vision in which the girl is a wanton blonde smoking a cigarette and wearing a revealing outfit. This stands as a metaphor for Asha's warped perspective, as in reality Hashida conforms to none of the older woman's stereotypes. The extent of Asha's dislocation from reality is marked by her being unaware of where she is when she comes around from her visions. She has also often been drenched in the interim, from walking into the sea or standing under a sprinkler. Her stereotypes are thereby relegated to a fantastical world that does not correspond with the way things really are, yet they also serve as comical hiatuses from an otherwise fairly gritty feminist plot revolving around sexism, domestic violence and prejudice amidst a nexus of social factors including ethnicity, gender and class. As such the visions comically mirror the real events of the plot, but from an adjusted comical perspective. By viewing social and familial dilemmas in the contrasting dimensions of gritty realism and farcical comedy it serves, controversially perhaps, to suggest that overcoming these issues can be reduced to a matter of perspective.

Comedy in *Bhaji on the Beach* is also derived from self-mockery within the migrant community. In Blackpool two of the teenage girls on the trip, Ladhu and Madhu, have

an argument over Madhu's tendency to 'let these white prats do it to [her].' To bring about reconciliation with her friend afterwards, Ladhu begins to mimic the older women on the trip. Dropping her usual Birmingham accent in favour of the Indian accent of a non-native speaker, she begins her speech in the same way as Pushpa did earlier: 't'irty years I have been here and I have never seen such a thing, getting stupid I-love-you you-love-me loving bites.' Her mimicry of the older women's accents and syntax slips into a mockery of their melodramatic approach to problems as the two girls end the scene in mutual laughter raising their hands in mock despair and exclaiming 'Hai Ram! Hai Ram!' (Oh Lord!) The film could as such be seen as pandering to stereotypical preconceptions about (particularly older) Asian women; however, it would be patronising to suggest that migrant communities should not laugh at themselves in the same way as any other does. As Rainer Emig asks: '[w]hy should ethnicity (and minority status) condemn people to a Puritan sobriety?'<sup>52</sup>

*Bhaji on the Beach* does distinguish self-abasing migrant comedy from white racism in one of its more sober scenes. Whilst sitting in a café, Hashida can hear two of the older women on the trip gossiping about her intercut with the racist observations of the white woman serving at the counter. In response to this, Hashida throws a hot drink at the older woman, before messing up the café counter and telling the waitress that she can 'fuck off too.' This illustrates that even though what the older women are doing is hurtful, it does not excuse the white woman's racism, and both are duly scolded (or scalded). By the end of the film, a new female solidarity is evident in the group of Subcontinental women, as they defend Ginder against her violent husband

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<sup>52</sup> Rainer Emig, 'The Empire Tickles Back: Hybrid Humour (and Its Problems) in Contemporary Asian-British Comedy', in *Hybrid Humour: Comedy in Transcultural Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 169-90 (p. 181).

and are brought together in laughter at a novelty boob-cake supplied by the Mumbaiite Rekha.

*Bhaji on the Beach* crosses generic and national boundaries and could be differently interpreted with a better knowledge of Bollywood, which informs the structure and stylistic conventions of the film.<sup>53</sup> Though Bollywood has gained popularity among Western audiences of late, Sandra Heinen argues that its appeal to South Asian diasporic communities is ‘fundamentally different,’ enabling a ‘construction of cultural identity [...] which not only links the diasporic viewers to their mother country, but also forms a strong tie between the different South Asian diasporas in the world.’<sup>54</sup> Ruben Gowricham similarly describes Bollywood as integral to a binding transnational culture.<sup>55</sup> By combining Bollywood and British filmic conventions with a British Asian cast and location Chadha has created a hybrid film that challenges and updates both genres. She espouses a feminism that is self-critical, illustrating the damage that can be done to women by other women and simultaneously advocates a female solidarity that transcends differences in ethnicity, class and age (though with the conspicuous absence of a white woman at any moment of unity).

A decade (and one American film) later, Chadha returned to Britain in order to make *Bend It Like Beckham*. Her motives were explicit: ‘I set out to [...] make the most commercial, mainstream, wide-appealing, multiplex movie I possibly could – with an

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<sup>53</sup> The film includes family drama, ill-fated lovers, generational dispute and song and dance, which are all typical Bollywood conventions.

<sup>54</sup> Sandra Heinen, ‘Multi-Ethnic Britain on Screen: South Asian Diasporic Experience in Recent Feature Films’, in *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts*, ed. by Lars Eckstein, Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker and Christoph Reinfandt (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 65-78 (p. 67).

<sup>55</sup> Ruben Gowricham, ‘Bollywood in Diaspora’, *SVMK*, 19 (2003) <[http://www.svmk.nl/pdf/bollywood\\_in\\_diaspora.pdf](http://www.svmk.nl/pdf/bollywood_in_diaspora.pdf)> [accessed 27 November 2012], 1-9 (p. 8).

Indian girl in the lead.’<sup>56</sup> The result is a classic ‘feel-good’ film based around the parallel plights of Jesminder (Jess) Bhamra and Juliette (Jules) Paxton, who are passionate and driven when it comes to football, much to the distress of their respective families. Writing about late eighteenth century British comedy, Jean Marsden asserts that ‘English comedy does indeed become a representation of national character – at least as the British would like to see themselves.’<sup>57</sup> Over two centuries later and the same can be said of Chadha’s film, which effectively represents Britain as a multicultural utopia. Chadha is happy being described as a British filmmaker, saying that ‘because I have redefined what Britain means in my work, I’m comfortable with British, because I know British also includes me.’<sup>58</sup>

In order to create her happy, multicultural British society, Chadha pictures concerns associated with race, religion and ethnicity as part of a more universal problem of sexual discrimination. This is enabled by constructing an essentialist image of femininity encoded through shopping, materialism, physical appearance and ostentatious heteronormative sexuality that Jess and Jules must battle against. This outdated, pre-feminist construction of femininity is primarily represented by the girls’ mothers. Whereas Jules’s mother wants to enhance her daughter’s sexual desirability with a pump-up bra, Jules chooses a sports bra for practicality. In a parallel scenario, Jess undergoes a sari fitting prior to her sister’s wedding; although Jess would prefer the sari to be looser, the fitter pulls the tape measure tighter, whilst joking with Jess’s mother that ‘even these mosquito bites will look like juicy juicy mangoes,’ provoking the mirth of both Jess’s mother and sister.

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<sup>56</sup> Chadha in interview, Korte and Sternberg, p. 250.

<sup>57</sup> Jean Marsden, ‘Performing the West Indies: Comedy, Feeling, and British Identity’, *Comparative Drama*, 42 (2008), 73-88 (p. 75).

<sup>58</sup> Chadha in interview, Korte and Sternberg, p. 249.

By concentrating on the sexual desirability of their daughters' bodies, the mothers are shown to be furthering patriarchal ideals via comparisons to male responses. When Jess is playing football with her male friends, they imply that her body makes her less suited to the sport, by taunting her to 'chest it.' Instead, she hurls the ball at one of the boy's groins, doubling him over in pain and deconstructing the culturally encoded stereotype about the fragility of women's bodies. The parallel nature of these scenes, all concerned with the girls' chests, illustrates that the older women occupy a similar role to men through their pre-feminist sexual stereotyping that serves to further patriarchal ideals. Justine Ashby remarks that the mothers' 'limited ambitions for their daughters are coded as trivial and laughably *prefeminist*. Rendered comic, their misgivings can be swept away with relative ease.'<sup>59</sup> Set amidst the cultural thrall of the Spice Girls and declarations of 'girl power,' the film can easily laugh off the ideals and traditions of an older generation as outdated.<sup>60</sup>

The generation gap is captured through the aesthetic juxtaposition of two sequences. Firstly, a montage of scenes shot in the centre of London using natural lighting and bright colours shows Jess buying football boots to the tune of former Spice Girl Mel C's 'Independence Day.'<sup>61</sup> A cut to the beige and brown colours of the Bhamras' living room, with artificial lighting and near-static characters appears by comparison to be set in the past, suggesting a bygone and claustrophobic way of life. The

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<sup>59</sup> Justine Ashby, 'Postfeminism in the British Frame', *Cinema Journal*, 44 (2005), 127-33 (p. 130).

<sup>60</sup> It is interesting, however, that Jess and Jules fall out during a fight over a man, somewhat weakening the film's feminist edge and undermining the 'homosocial' bond that the pair have formed.

<sup>61</sup> Mel C (formerly Sporty Spice), was earlier referred to by Jules's mother as the only member of the band who did not have a boyfriend. As such she becomes symbolic of an alternative way of being a woman, as well as provoking the disdain of an older generation.

incongruity of the two images creates a comical gap between the parallel lives that Jess leads. Audiences are positioned to laugh at the scene within the Bhamras' household, because it does not seem to have a place in the world that has been depicted during the immediately preceding exterior montage.

Another effect of prioritising gender battles in the film is that concerns raised by Jess's family regarding cultural and religious values about the role of women are viewed in the light of a more universal problem (regarding the role of women in society and/or the family). Although Jess might receive a particularly hard time from her family in respect to her wishes to play football, there are comparisons made throughout to the similar plights of both Jules and her coach, Joe, who has a fraught relationship with his father. By focussing on universal topics like family dispute, patriarchal attitudes and the place of women in society, this film gently undermines stereotypes and questions an inclination to Other according to cultural difference by creating parallels between different cultures. As a result, when Jess faces a wall of footballers blocking her penalty kick and imaginatively substitutes them for family members, it is the fact that they are *female* family members rather than Sikhs that poses the greatest threat to Jess reaching her 'goal' in the context of the film.

Chadha's film integrates difference by utilising a multidirectional satire that weakens any specific site of attack and ensures that overall the comedy prioritises inclusion above subversion. I borrow the term 'multidirectional satire' from Ball, who asserts that the 'concept of satirical multidirectionality [...] works against the binary model of norm and deviation and offers one in which oppositions may be set up without either

side being endorsed.<sup>62</sup> This is effected during *Bend It Like Beckham* by gently poking fun at a number of characters, whether it be Paula Paxton (Juliette's mother) who misreads Jules as a lesbian, Mrs Bhamra who is frequently duped by her daughters, or Tony's family, who believe that their homosexual son is hopelessly in love with Jess. During a scene at the end of Pinky Bhamra's wedding, Jules is dropped off to the celebrations by her mother. When Mrs. Paxton steps out of the car and sees Jess wearing her shoes she reads this as confirmation of her suspicions that Jess is involved in a lesbian relationship with her daughter, shouting 'get your lesbian feet out of my shoes!' However, this misreading is met with equal confusion, as Jess's relatives do not understand what is meant by 'lesbian' and counter her attack with 'she's not Lebanese, she's Punjabi.' In a farcical progression, this is topped with 'I thought she was a Pisces,' thereby misinterpreting 'lesbian' as a star sign. This scene encourages laughter at a number of different characters who are unable correctly to read the situation, and in turn ensures that a satirical attack in any specific direction is weakened. If the misreading had been voiced by Mrs Paxton alone, then she would be the sole butt of the joke and the full force of the laughter would be directed against her, but a collection of misreadings serves to democratise the laughter and thereby weakens its blow.

Chadha's film presents an ultimately happy, hopeful and multicultural Britain. However, this kind of representation has not been exempt from criticism, due to its tendency to turn a blind eye to political realities of the day. Ashby summarises the political zeitgeist:

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<sup>62</sup> John Clement Ball, p. 21.

Given that *Bend It Like Beckham* was released in the context of racially motivated public disorder in northern English towns and cities in 2001, the election successes of the explicitly racist British National Party in 2002, and the widespread victimization of British Muslims following 9/11, it is difficult not to conclude that this choice of an ending provides a highly selective, even utopian view of Blair's Britain.<sup>63</sup>

Chadha's portrayal of Britain reads as a cover-up that sweeps social problems under the carpet. In keeping with this evasion of contemporary social issues, Chadha resorts to archaic British Others in order to perform Jess's integration. Following a football match against a German team, Jess is consoled by her teammates that she's now part of a tradition for losing a penalty shootout to the 'Jerries,' invoking Britain's former Others (exemplified in the football chant 'two world wars and one world cup').

What is more problematic is that the comedy's happy resolution is only possible if ethnic minority characters conform to Western values of freedom above other (conflicting) cultural values such as respect for elders or religious duties.<sup>64</sup> For Heinen, the cultural hierarchies embedded in the film are more problematic than its naïvely utopian ending: 'in *Bend It Like Beckham* [...] Western values are in the end the only common ground on which the two cultures can meet.'<sup>65</sup> This problem is apparent when Jess expresses concern at having to bare her legs to play football and requests to keep her tracksuit bottoms on, but Joe unquestioningly replies in the negative. However, when she lurks in the spectator stand rather than warming up, Joe comes to see what is wrong, and it is revealed that Jess is embarrassed about a burn that has disfigured her leg. After a short conversation Jess's embarrassment is

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<sup>63</sup> Ashby, p. 131.

<sup>64</sup> This is similarly evident in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Heinen, p. 77.

comically deflated: when Joe says he's sorry, Jess replies 'I know; put me off beans on toast for life.' What is problematic about this scene is that Jess's mother had previously expressed concern at her daughter revealing her legs during a daydream at the film's opening, so reasons for keeping her legs covered have been foreshadowed. The fact that Jess's reasons for covering are different to her mother's does not change the fact that Jess is given no option *but* to wear shorts before Joe has even allowed her to explain. In this manner, the film assumes unquestioning submission to modern Western values, suggesting that traditional, cultural or religious concerns are archaic and irrelevant to the younger generation.

Overall, the 'gentle' comedy employed in the above films has both its strengths and its limitations. In terms of spectatorship, these films have all achieved mainstream success, something that Chadha explicitly strives for, having turned her back on 'films that only academics are going to see and appreciate,' an accusation she levels at Black Audio and Sankofa Film Collective.<sup>66</sup> However, 'mainstreaming' may also be understood negatively as 'a "streamlining" of culture, as a subordination of cultural specificity to one hegemonic cultural strand.'<sup>67</sup> Problematic subordination to cultural hegemony is indeed something that I have exposed in the above films, largely through pandering to a utopian view of multicultural society. I will now analyse two films that are anything but gentle, but nevertheless owe a lot to the work done by this first wave of postcolonial British comedy. The following films rely heavily upon a sense of irony that may not have been possible without the work done by previous filmmakers, who have gently undermined stereotypes and paved the way for inclusive laughter.

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<sup>66</sup> Chadha in interview, Korte and Sternberg, p. 251. Rushdie makes a similar accusation regarding the Black Audio Collective produced *Handsworth Songs*, which he charges with 'describing a living world in the dead language of race-industry professionals.' *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 116.

<sup>67</sup> Korte and Sternberg, p. 8.

### Laughing through the Fears

The final section of this chapter removes us from the comfort zone of happy multiculturalism and generously inclusive laughter enacted in the previous films. Historically speaking, the official party-line of multiculturalism introduced with the Labour government in 1997 has soured. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent ‘War on Terror,’ mutually embarked on by George Bush and Tony Blair, Tahir Abbas marks the shift from a ‘benign multiculturalism to a malevolent one.’ The country has moved from what he terms the ‘high successes’ of ‘the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000), the Human Rights Act (1998) and the Stephen Lawrence Report’ to the ‘low failures’ of the ‘War on Terror,’ pervasive domestic security and a situation where ‘young British Muslims are increasingly found to be in the precarious position of having to choose one set of loyalties in relation to the other (Islamic vs British).’<sup>68</sup> Abbas concludes that ‘[m]ulticulturalism has strong limitations because it rejects “cultures” that do not correspond to nation states.’<sup>69</sup>

The two films that form the focus of the remainder of this chapter concern themselves with disenfranchised communities within British society, directly addressing the side of multiculturalism repressed by utopian ideals such as Chadha’s. Chris Morris’s *Four Lions* (2010) and Joe Cornish’s *Attack the Block* (2011) focus on the culturally and politically stigmatised figures of the suicide bomber (in the case of the former) and the gang member (in the case of the latter). However, by including figures that are often excluded from benign representations of multicultural Britain in a comic

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<sup>68</sup> Tahir Abbas, ‘British South Asian Muslims: before and after September 11’, in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, ed. by Tahir Abbas (London: Zed Books, 2005), pp. 3-17 (pp. 5, 16).

<sup>69</sup> Tahir Abbas, p. 17.

manner, the films do not reinforce patterns of exclusion and encourage laughter at the outsider. Instead, they parody media constructions of fear and undermine us/them affiliations encouraged by a form of Britishness that expresses itself in relation to culturally subordinated and 'extreme' Others.

I argue that these incredibly comic films undermine comedy's generic convention of providing a happy and mutually satisfying ending for all of the characters. In this sense, the films could be considered comical in mode rather than in genre: this is comedy in spite of itself, relentlessly funny yet refusing to offer comic appeasement as a solution to social problems. I have chosen to call this section 'laughing through the fears,' as both films tackle the cultural construction of fear and offer laughter as an alternative response to a sense of threat.

*Four Lions* is the first feature-length film by Chris Morris, a director notorious for his dark humour and outrageous satire. This notoriety stems from work such as *Brass Eye*, a televised series of mockumentaries that take the media frenzy surrounding controversial topics such as drug addiction and paedophilia as their inspiration. In *Four Lions*, the focus of hysteria that he brings to light surrounds a group of 'jihadis' from South Yorkshire as they plan and carry out a suicide mission. The group of men – comprising Omar, Barry, Waj, Hassan and, prior to his untimely demise, Faisal – spend the majority of their time in-fighting, which enables Morris to find humour in the frequently hyperbolised threat of the suicide bomber. Also a first-time film director with TV credits, Joe Cornish interweaves a sci-fi alien-invasion plot with

comedy in *Attack the Block*.<sup>70</sup> The film takes a Brixton gang and their fight against aliens as its focus, largely deriving comedy from the gang's discourse.

*Attack the Block* and *Four Lions* work to subvert stereotypes by including stock 'types' (the gang member, the student and the nurse, for example) but fleshing them out in order to create rounded and complex characters. By using these stock 'types' it is possible to assume certain preconceptions or associations; however, by making characters emotionally complex and therefore believable, they are not constrained to re-enacting a series of stereotypes. As such, any stereotypes that are engaged in the films are done so ironically. This ensures that audiences are forced to analyse how and why the stereotypes have gained such currency.

In order to challenge diminishing stereotypes, *Attack the Block* draws on some common associations made with black cultures via references to music, drugs and violence and undermines these associations through the plot. Brewis, for example, is the film's most dependent consumer of marijuana and is always introduced by a diegetic soundtrack of black rap or reggae music playing in his headphones. However, his white, middle-class status destabilises associations between the music or marijuana as solely emanating from black cultures. The film also portrays black characters as inherently British rather than Britain's Other, as racist rhetoric attempts to. An emblematic image towards the end of Cornish's film shows the hero, Moses, hanging out of a window and only prevented from plummeting to his death by the Union Jack flag that he clasps.

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<sup>70</sup> Joe Cornish is best known for *The Adam and Joe Show*, a comedy written and presented by himself and Adam Buxton that ran from 1996-2001.

*Four Lions* tackles stereotypes alternatively by employing tropes of surveillance and thereby drawing attention to the way that material is framed and presented to viewers. The ring-leader, Omar, is himself a security guard, which works as an enabling trope for meta-cinematically foregrounding processes of observation and representation, whilst questioning who is controlling the camera's gaze and to what end. Like Morris's earlier work, *Four Lions* plays with the documentary format through the use of handheld cameras and a plot-line driven around the build-up to a climactic event. In some senses it parodies 'ethnographic' documentaries by taking a marginalised group as its object and working on the basis of grass-roots research.

However, rather than presenting the material as scientific and/or objective, the film is shot in a manner that Fatimah Tobing Rony would describe as employing the 'third eye,' evidencing a 'sensitivity to Subject and Object double-consciousness.'<sup>71</sup> By means of bringing the camera to the forefront and exposing viewing perspectives as constructed by the camera, this manner of filming challenges 'popular and scientific conceptions of the Ethnographic' in which, '[w]ith the presence of the camera obscured, the viewer is meant to observe and experience the film as if he or she had been there, from a "fly on the wall" perspective.'<sup>72</sup> Tobing Rony speaks of the 'third eye' predominantly in terms of 'a person of colour growing up in the United States,' for whom 'the experience of viewing oneself as an object is profoundly formative,' which renders the term inapplicable to Morris as a white man filming a group that is frequently presented as the Other of British culture. But the director is nevertheless sensitive to the danger of presenting the camera's gaze as objective by constantly drawing attention to it. Whilst films like *East is East* have been criticised for their

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<sup>71</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 207.

<sup>72</sup> Tobing Rony, pp. 196-97.

tendency to reproduce a spectacle of the Other that was easily consumable by a mainstream audience, the self-reflexive camera-work of *Four Lions* assures that the gaze is also turned back on audiences.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the latest wave of comedy is so much more aggressive than its forebears is down to the fact that, as white directors, Morris and Cornish are entirely unconcerned with challenging or offending white audiences. Rather than gently pursuing what Emig terms the ‘integration of difference’ in an inclusive and benevolent manner, these directors unflinchingly pose critical questions as to the social conditions (of poverty, exclusion) that must be present for the rise of gang culture or Islamism to occur, as well as interrogating the function of media representations in exacerbating the state of affairs.<sup>73</sup>

The opening scenes of Morris’s film foreground concerns of observation, representation and performativity in order to further subvert the conventions of traditional ethnography. During the shooting of the initial home video – intended as an explanation of the suicide mission the bombers intend to carry out – cuts between POV shots through a handheld camera and a high-angle, seemingly omniscient shot, pave the way for two of the important perspectives in the film: that of the bombers, and a god’s-eye view, suggesting a bigger picture. The third important viewing perspective is introduced later in the film via CCTV and night-vision cameras that imply the aspect of surveillance that the characters are subjected to. Concerns over providing a convincing performance are expressed during the shooting of this video; Waj’s comically small (toy) gun raises questions of performance and the (thwarted)

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<sup>73</sup> Emig, p. 176.

desire to be taken seriously, whilst Faisal refuses to take a box off his head, illustrating his intent not to be watched but also rendering any attempts to be taken seriously futile. Showing characters as explicitly *acting* and responding to the presence of a camera works to subvert the conventions of traditional ethnography, in which ‘the individual “native” [or in this case, character from ethnic minority background] is often not even “seen” by the viewer but is taken for real.’<sup>74</sup>

Yet concerns over an effective performance also serve more seriously to index the spectacle, or what Mark Juergensmeyer has termed the ‘theater’ of religious terrorism, in which a convincing performance is necessary to convey the ‘power and ideology implicit in acts of terrorism.’<sup>75</sup> The reason for the importance of an effective performance is further elaborated by Nico Prucha in his analysis of online *jihadism* as propaganda in which ‘habitual denominators (praying *Mujahideen*, recitations of the Quran, singing *nasheed*, poetry, burial ceremonies etc.)’ are used to indicate a commonality with viewers and to render them more susceptible to the legitimisation of violence also displayed.<sup>76</sup> A persuasive performance is, as such, integral to the embedded film’s posthumous reception, as its purpose is not merely explanatory, but is also intended to function as an ideological advertisement for the online *ummah*.

*Four Lions* portrays characters with an extreme paranoia of being persistently observed that is ultimately shown to be warranted, as it becomes increasingly apparent that the characters *are* being watched. This is registered by including integral scenes

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<sup>74</sup> Tobing Rony, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 128, 127.

<sup>76</sup> Nico Prucha, ‘Online Territories of Terror – Utilizing the Internet for Jihadist Endeavours’, *Jihadism Online* (2011) <<http://www.univie.ac.at/jihadism/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Prucha-Online-Territories.pdf>> [accessed 11 January 2012], p. 2.

that are focalised through a CCTV lens, or through extra-diegetic camera clicks that do not visibly originate in the scene being shot. The comedy works in a curious way in this situation, as means of avoiding observation are shown as increasingly farcical and overblown, yet the reason behind the lions' actions is ultimately justified both within the film and without in skewed media representations that tend to present a one-sided, monologic view of Islam and its adherents. Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin argue that what we see in the Western media today 'is the distortion of particular features of Muslim life and custom, reducing the diversity of Muslims and their existence as individuals to a fixed object – a caricature in fact.'<sup>77</sup> They suggest that this 'distortion' is brought about through 'framing structures' that 'rather than being descriptive and neutral [...] are defined by questions of belonging, "Otherness," and threat.'<sup>78</sup> This signals the importance of critically challenging the representation of Islam perpetuated by the media.

Internal conflict and contradiction assures that in Morris's film Muslim characters are not taken as representative, meaning that Islam cannot be homogenised and fixed as Other. Amongst various anti-observation tactics employed in the film, some of the bombers take to shaking their heads in order to blur any images that are captured. When he notices this, Omar observes, 'CCTV's a video, you're just gonna look like a load of Sufis on speed!' This scene deconstructs monolithic representations of Islam by performing an internal Othering of Sufi Muslims and comically debasing the mystical element of Sufism by associating it with drug abuse. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam discuss the danger of characters from ethnic minorities becoming 'allegorical,' arguing that 'within hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as

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<sup>77</sup> Morey and Yaqin, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Morey and Yaqin, p. 21.

synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community,' whereas '[r]epresentations of dominant groups [...] are seen not as allegorical but as "naturally" diverse, examples of ungeneralizable variety of life itself.'<sup>79</sup> By focussing the entire film around a group of suicide bombers and their internal nexus of relationships rather than having a lone or token character, Morris assures that diverse and conflicting personalities and belief attitudes are shown, and individual characters do not become allegorical or representative.

Morris's film separates surface signifiers of Muslim identity and actual belief attitudes in order to challenge media stereotypes dependent on stock images. The most powerful example of this occurs during a parallel montage of scenes. Images shot in the flat where the group discuss plans to take their suicide mission to the marathon are alternated with images shot from a shaky hand-held camera somewhere outside, with green lighting used to suggest night-vision. Progressively shorter intervals between cuts bring the montage to a climax as the flat is surrounded by police. At a climactic point the flat that has been shot from outside is forcefully entered by the police. Inside – rather than the anticipated group of suicide bombers – are a group of older Muslim scholars, who had previously been ridiculed by the bombers for their peaceful and cerebral interpretation of Islam. The comedy climaxes as the police read the wielding of a water pistol by Omar's brother, Ahmed, as signifying violent intent. The dramatic irony is that the audience will recognise the 'weapon' as the same water pistol that Ahmed had previously refused to use when provoked by Omar's wife, Sofia. The construction of this scene suggests that popular understandings of Islam depend on surface signifiers of Muslim identity – the beards and traditional dress

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<sup>79</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 183.

sported by the older scholars – rather than actual belief attitudes (defined by Giovanna Borradori as ‘the way in which we believe rather than what we believe in’).<sup>80</sup>

As such, the plot justifies the farcical anti-observation efforts of the bombers, as Muslims *are* being targeted for observation, just the wrong ones. In this case the extreme actions of the four lions are portrayed as a response to the society that they live in; their fears are justified in the context of the film, putting the critical onus on damaging misrepresentations and superficial stereotypes rather than the bombers as a serious threat. The bombers themselves are ultimately the only human casualties of their bombs.

Having demonstrated how stereotypes are engaged in both films, I will now examine them separately so as to address the specific fears that they turn into sources of laughter. Unlike the national media, which largely conforms to culturally accepted notions of political correctness, the two films I am discussing deploy offensive language, trade openly in stereotypes and encourage laughter at minority groups. This conversely serves to highlight the hypocrisy of the media by revealing what is obscured by politically correct language. Following a convincing discussion of comedy’s ‘double-edged’ expression of both desire and derision, Virginia Richter argues that:

The function of laughter cannot be subsumed exclusively either under the heading of transgression nor under the heading of social control: it serves to stabilise the hierarchy between different social groups – black/white, middle-

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<sup>80</sup> Giovanna Borradori, ‘Introduction: Terrorism and the Legacy of the Enlightenment – Habermas and Derrida’, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 1-22 (p. 18).

class/poor, doctor/patient, university educated/uneducated, but it is also transgressive since it discloses the aggressive desires habitually glossed over by politically correct language.<sup>81</sup>

Her argument makes it apparent that whilst comedy can only ever reproduce hierarchies, however ironically, it does enable the revelation of the ‘aggressive desires,’ or fears, which are linguistically repressed. No matter how controversial the films might seem, they only expose stereotypes and prejudices that must already have currency in contemporary discourse in order for audiences to appreciate their irony.

Morris both finds humour and combats fear in the portrayal of suicide bombers that are hopelessly inept. Rather than an organised network of cold killers, Morris’s film presents us with an absurdly disorganised array of characters, demonstrating traits of kindness, brotherhood and comic ineptitude alongside their desires to fight the *kafir* (unbelievers). This goes against the grain of representations of terrorists in previous Hollywood-produced films, integral to which is what Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard have described as a ‘monolithic culture of thuggish male warriors who relish violence, directed mostly against innocent civilians, and who lack motives beyond hatred and jealousy.’ Boggs and Pollard highlight the inherent contradiction of this, as ‘[d]espite their lack of intellectual sophistication and political strategy [...] such warriors are depicted as a grave threat to the very foundations of civilized society.’<sup>82</sup>

*Four Lions* exposes discrepancies in the representation of terrorism by aligning the end result more closely to the haphazard strategies adopted by the characters

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<sup>81</sup> Virginia Richter, ‘Laughter and aggression: Desire and derision in a postcolonial context’, in *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, ed. by Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 61-72 (p. 71).

<sup>82</sup> Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, ‘Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism’, *New Political Science*, 28.3 (2006), 335-51 (p. 347).

throughout. The name that the group of bombers give themselves – the ‘four lions’ – serves as a further means of tempering serious intent with farcical actions. Their chosen moniker connotes both Osama bin Laden, also known as ‘The Lion,’ and *The Lion King*, a story that Omar renarrates in order to metaphorically explain his actions to his young son. As well as complicating a picture that would be easier to fear in its simple singularity (the suicide bomber as pure evil), the juxtaposition of bin Laden and *The Lion King*’s Simba also serves to deflate the perceived power of the former Al Qaeda leader.

A further source of comedy that Morris derives from the figure of the suicide bomber is the uncertainty surrounding the concept of *jihad* in Islam, along with the associated matters of martyrdom, terrorism and suicide bombing.<sup>83</sup> Much of the film’s comedy originates in arguments over how the group should be training and what would be the best target for attack. The wide array of beliefs surrounding what *jihad* means and how it should be exercised are stretched to ridiculous proportions in Morris’s film, in which Barry (the group’s white convert and the most illogical and aggressive figure in the group) advocates bombing a mosque to radicalise the moderates, whilst Faisal wants to ‘bomb Boots’ for selling condoms that ‘make you wanna bang white girls.’ When Faisal comes to an unfortunate demise (caused by tripping over with a bag of explosives) Barry believes that he is a martyr for damaging the infrastructure by simultaneously blowing up a nearby sheep. However, Omar’s question as to whether Faisal is ‘a martyr or [...] a *fucking* jalfrezi?’ illustrates uncertainties in interpretation even from those committed to a suicide mission. Violent understandings of *jihad* are

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<sup>83</sup> For a detailed discussion of the concept of *jihad* according to both scriptural interpretation and popular understanding in Muslim communities, see Humayan Ansari, ‘Attitudes to Jihad, Martyrdom and Terrorism among British Muslims’ in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, ed. by Tahir Abbas (London: Zed Books, 2005), pp. 144-63 (pp. 145-50).

contrasted with the comically pacifist Ahmed, who is so stringent in his non-violent beliefs that he even refuses to engage in a water fight, preferring to quote opinions than squirt water. This illustrates that devoted Muslim belief can equally *preclude* violence, giving voice to a dominant understanding of *jihad* that prioritises inner struggle over armed fighting.<sup>84</sup>

However, there is a more sinister undertone to this proliferation of sentiments regarding *jihad*, as its violent interpretation is shown to thrive only in certain circles; in the case of the film it is the young, disaffected men rather than the older scholars who interpret *jihad* in a violent way. Humayan Ansari discusses interpretations of *jihad* in Muslim communities following a survey of British Muslims in the wake of 9/11 (although prior to the 7/7 London bombings). He notes that interpretations of *jihad* have tended to emphasise either its peaceful or its violent nature, positing personal understanding as well as circumstance as influential factors.<sup>85</sup> So perhaps what is being mocked in the film is the uncertainty surrounding such a crucial point of belief, but I would argue instead that the film exercises the critique of a society that produces the ‘circumstances’ in which people choose to interpret *jihad* in a violent way; as is voiced in the film, ‘why shouldn’t I be a bomber if you treat me like one?’

The way that the film operates dares members of the audience to make judgements about characters in order to illustrate that it is just such pre-judgements that create the right atmosphere for previously peaceful characters to radicalise. During a scene at a public debate Hassan wants to test people’s reactions to him as a Muslim. He stands up and starts rapping: ‘I’m the Mujahideen and I’m making a scene, now you gonna

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<sup>84</sup> Ansari, p. 147.

<sup>85</sup> Ansari, p. 147.

feel what the boom boom means; it's like Tupac said, when I die I'm not dead; we are the martyrs, you're just squashed tomatoes. Allahu akbar!' At this point he sets off a line of party poppers that are strung around his waist and designed to look like bombs. In response to the screams and shocked faces that a wide shot of the audience captures, he responds 'Just cos I'm Muslim you thought it was real?!' During this scene the diegetic gaze of the audience responding to Hassan acts as a foil for cinema audiences, assuming a certain kind of subject: these are people attending a talk panel entitled 'Islam: Moderation and Progress.' This talk apparently draws a similar mix of middle-class liberals and students that Film4 marketing hopes to attract, by producing films that are 'alternative' and aimed at 'an intelligent audience.'<sup>86</sup>

By challenging the response of this audience, the film attacks the insidious prejudice disguised in the politically correct language of the middle class, rather than explicit racist abuse. To do this, Morris creates the circumstances in which prejudgments about previously non-violent Muslim characters engender violent reactions, rather than the reverse; Hassan is recruited by Barry at a later stage in the film. As such, fear creates its object, and by comically undermining the way that fear of suicide bombers engenders a response in the film, Morris stays true to form by attacking the media that create such hysteria around the threat of suicide missions. When Hassan's party poppers go off the audience is granted comic relief that ridicules any prejudiced preconceptions that may have been harboured. To laugh at something reduces its power to induce fear; in pursuit of this, Morris provokes laughter at sites of excess (as in the tension built up during Hassan's rap) as a way of *combating* the production of cultural fears.

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<sup>86</sup> 'Film4', *Channel 4 Sales* <<http://www.channel4sales.com/platforms/Film4>> [accessed 12 January 2012].

Scenes such as the above illustrate the real work required to rethink the complexities of terrorism and its relationship to national politics and the media. With considerable foresight, Jean Baudrillard argued (in 1993) that ‘the violence of old was more enthusiastic and sacrificial than ours,’ whereas now we are faced with ‘a simulacrum of violence, emerging less from passion than from the screen, a violence in the nature of the image.’<sup>87</sup> Understanding acts of terrorism in this manner highlights the self-perpetuating nature of violence and its media-generated image; violence does not beget violence *per se*, but by means of the repetition and spectacle of its reproduced image. The cycle feeds off itself. Boggs and Pollard similarly argue that terrorism on film would be better understood as ‘a mode of political activity that both *reflects* and helps *create* a violent society of the spectacle where pervasive feelings of fear, anxiety and paranoia are reproduced daily.’<sup>88</sup> Working against this cinematic trend, *Four Lions* serves to challenge monolithic perspectives on terrorism, calling into question the interrelated domains of media and national politics and their complicity in creating and perpetuating instances of the terrorist subject.

As in *The Satanic Verses*, *Four Lions* also mixes the sacred and the profane. However this is where the similarity ends, as unlike Rushdie’s novel where the profanity seems designed to shock, give offence and debase a whole religion, in Morris’s film profanity serves instead to depict characters as humanly flawed individuals, without passing judgment on the religion itself. Dialogues containing quick switches from ‘salaam aleikums’ to crudely scatological comments and insults illustrate the hypocrisy of ordinary characters that want to bring about shari’a law but cannot

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<sup>87</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Transformation of Evil* (London: Verso: 1993), pp. 75-76.

<sup>88</sup> Boggs and Pollard, p. 351.

control their own profanities, encouraging laughter at the faithful rather than the faith. By presenting flawed individuals, the film encourages audiences to refrain from homogenising religious believers under simplifying ideological banners.

Waj is the film's main example of a flawed and confused believer; he is portrayed as childlike throughout, with a prayer bear to say his prayers and books like *The Camel that went to the Mosque* that serve as indexes of his immature approach to Islam. The extent to which his religious belief is divorced from any real understanding becomes apparent when he and Omar go to a training camp in Pakistan and are preparing to pray: Waj cannot understand why the rest of the men are praying towards the West rather than the East, despite repeated insistences that they have flown over Mecca. His farcical confusion illustrates his childlike devotion to religious practices without comprehending the meaning behind them.

Furthermore, a series of stories that Omar offers to Waj as justifications for what they are doing mimic the bed-time stories that Omar tells his young son. This internal parallel means that Waj's absurd repetition of 'rubber dingy rapids bro' (after Omar's analogy for the joy of the afterlife), is filled with pathos as it becomes clear how theologically confused he is and how much he clings onto this childish metaphor for Paradise. Ultimately it is Omar's trickery of Waj – confusing him and thereby denying him the free choice of martyrdom – that engenders the pathos of the ending; the comedy turns sour and Waj is left sitting in a kebab shop about to blow himself and the Muslim owner up, surrounded by armed police and helplessly questioning whether he'll still get points for taking the Muslim man with him, 'like Nectar card.' I

return to the (un)comic endings of *Four Lions* in comparison to *Attack the Block* at the end of the chapter.

Whereas *Four Lions* challenges the media hype and exacerbation of fear surrounding suicide bombing, *Attack the Block* takes representations of the postcolonial city as its comic and critical focus. When writing on ‘postcolonial London,’ John McLeod prefers to prioritise fictions that imagine London in utopian terms. Whilst he allows that ‘[c]ultural creativity should not be considered outside of London’s insoluble and unforgettable social conflicts,’ he nevertheless focuses on texts that seek to ‘daringly imagine an alternative city in which divisive tensions are effectively resisted.’<sup>89</sup> The aim of his project is ‘to suggest that [...] projective, utopian impulses possess a transformative potential which contributes to and resources the changing shape and experiences of London’s “facticity”.’<sup>90</sup> It is apparent that McLeod’s critical agenda is comparable to Chadha’s fictional one: imagining a utopian space into being. However, just as I have argued that Chadha’s utopian imaginings work unwittingly to efface those who do not comfortably fit the benignly multicultural picture, critical paradigms that work around such visions arguably aid the same process.

In response to this I step away from visions of the middle-class idyll of a multicultural city, frequently expressed in terms of flaccid political correctness or according to utopian aspirations of ‘progression’ and ‘transformation.’<sup>91</sup> Instead I examine the alternative critique offered by *Attack the Block*, which depends on a *dystopian*, rather than utopian vision of the city and does not pretend to reimagine London in any ‘progressive’ or ‘transformative’ way. Primarily, the film simply does not attempt to

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<sup>89</sup> McLeod, pp. 15, 16.

<sup>90</sup> McLeod, p. 16.

<sup>91</sup> McLeod, p. 16.

address any vision of London at large, instead focussing on a very localised drama centred in the Brixton neighbourhood, an area long defined by the media and popular culture as synonymous with riot, poverty, gang culture, violence, drugs and its Afro-Caribbean community. Historically the area has been home to heavy handed policing ('Operation Swamp 81'), hosted riots in 1980, 1985, 1995 and 2011, and has been bombed by a neo-Nazi in 1999. Culturally it has been referenced in James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta* as the place where riots first break out and in The Clash's 'The Guns of Brixton' as a place of resistance to unjust policing. Brixton definitely does not signify 'benign' multiculturalism: quite the contrary.

Cornish's film draws on the genres of dystopia and visceral horror accompanied by stylistic tropes of the noir thriller, as it plunges the viewer into Brixton amidst an alien invasion that is ignored by the media and police alike. The establishing shot is a pan of a bustling London city amidst the spectacles of Firework night; the camera then zooms down to capture a white woman (Sam) leaving Oval tube station and moving away from the bright lights of the city into graffitied streets with lower lighting and in which people cast elongated shadows, echoing conventions of the noir thriller. The way that Sam exits the open frame of the shot as she walks down the shadowy street suggests that there is something that we should be aware of outside the frame. Sure enough, against the exposed backdrop of the graffitied wall, another silhouette enters the frame, heightening the tension. A series of shots and reverse-shots in rapidly increasing cuts reveals that she is surrounded by a gang, who proceed to rob her of her purse and ring. As yet, there is little cause for laughter. However, the tone soon changes from gritty realism to farce, as the gang who 'merk' Sam are subsequently

confronted with an alien invasion: ‘that’s an alien bruv. Trying to take over the Earth. Believe it. But it ended in the wrong place. The wrong place.’

London is a city trapped in its symbolism, with even the names of streets or small districts suggesting a chain of significations and associations, well known even to those who have not visited the area. Cornish’s film at once plays upon this symbolic over-determination and simultaneously defamiliarises the area, stripping it of its usual associations. *Attack the Block* defamiliarises Brixton by means of a generic shift. Aesthetic signifiers of the noir thriller employed in the tense and shadowy opening sequence – perhaps suited to an area (imaginatively) associated with drugs, gangs and violence – are displaced to accommodate the aesthetics of science fiction. Using familiar sci-fi effects the film is tinged with a green light, with all of the action revolving around a tower block that is illuminated to look like a space ship, both stylistic choices serving to create a sense of otherness.<sup>92</sup>

The film’s sci-fi elements also relate to the comic aspects of the film, because the character arc of the aliens parodies the history of Brixton’s migrant communities and their (problematically termed) ‘reverse colonisation’ of the area. From the first sighting of the alien, cited above, assumptions are made about their intentions to violently colonise; in response, the gang kill the first alien that they find and carry it around as a trophy. Like the majority of the gang members, the aliens are black; this is discussed by the gang, when one of the members observes that the alien they are

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<sup>92</sup> Within the film there are also nods to dystopian and science fiction authors: the tower block is called Wyndham Tower, connoting the science fiction author John Wyndham, and an arrest is made in Ballard Street, referencing the dystopian author J.G. Ballard, who wrote the novel *High Rise*, a social satire on Thatcherite greed that led to social degeneration according to wealth and status in a high rise block. J. G. Ballard, *High Rise* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006).

studying is 'blacker than my cousin Femi.' Parallels between the reception of the aliens and of predominantly black neighbourhoods in Britain are not subtle, hidden behind social niceties or politically correct language: they are black, alien and by settling in the neighbourhood are perceived to pose a threat to the indigenous community.

As in *Four Lions*, fear creates its object, and at the end of the film it is revealed that the gang have brought the attack on themselves by killing the first alien and unwittingly covering themselves in the female's pheromones, designed to attract subsequent male aliens; there is no indication that the aliens would have attacked otherwise. Simon Dentith argues:

[A]ll parody refunctions pre-existing text(s) and/or discourses, so that it can be said that these verbal structures are called to the readers' minds and then placed under erasure. A necessary modification of the original idea is that we must allow the act of erasure to operate critically rather than as merely neutral cancellation of its object.<sup>93</sup>

As such, Cornish's parody of migrant 'aliens' (one need hardly mention that this is a term also applied to foreigners), requires that the audience critically reconsider early responses to British immigration, and whether, as is suggested by the barely-disguised parody, subsequent unrest is not also the result of migrants' hostile receptions upon arrival to the country.

However, the film's critique is not limited to paralleling us/them relationships between migrant and native communities, but also challenges binaries *per se*.

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<sup>93</sup> Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 15-16.

References to ‘the beast(s)’ signify three different groups operating in the film: the aliens, the gang, and the police, all of whom are referred to as beasts or monsters within the first ten minutes. Upon discovery of the first alien the gang terms it the ‘Beast of Brixton,’ whilst both Sam and an older lady who comforts her after her attack refer to the gang as ‘fucking monsters,’ a statement that syntagmatically connotes the aliens by means a swift camera cut to the image of the alien. In a less apparent but undeniably present reference, the first song played on the film’s soundtrack is KRS-One’s ‘Sound of da Police’, which lyrically links the police with the beast:

Woop-woop!

That’s the sound of da police!

Woop-woop!

That’s the sound of the beast!<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, when Moses risks his life to rid the block of the aliens the camera follows the alien pursuit accompanied by a soundtrack of police sirens, once again casting the police and the ‘beasts’ in the same role, as predators preying on their mutual target. This complex destabilisation of understandings of ‘beastliness’ is reminiscent of *The Satanic Verses*, where though Saladin physically embodies a goatish beast, the police that abuse him in the van are ultimately depicted as beastly and brutish in comparison to Saladin’s meek submission and all-too-human shame (157-64).

However, the destabilisation of binaries enacted in *Attack the Block* does not pave the way for a ‘productive’ and culturally hybrid space as envisioned by Bhabha in his construction of the ‘Third Space of enunciation.’<sup>95</sup> Neither does it fall into the trap of

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<sup>94</sup> KRS-One, ‘Sound of da Police’, 1993.

<sup>95</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 38.

the kind of banal multiculturalism that frequently focuses on sites of affluence and in doing so simultaneously represses alternative (maybe less celebratory) stories. Instead, the film explores networks of local affiliations, with the looming tower block representing the focus of identification for characters. This is cinematically represented by the way that characters are introduced in the film, a tool that is often employed to convey important or defining characteristics: their beauty, malice or occupation, for example. Close-ups of the face might suggest the focus on a character's psychology, whilst long shots might prioritise setting or location as a way of defining the character. Cornish, however, opts to introduce his characters with shots of their feet, showing little more than their shoes and the streets that they are treading. This prioritises local identity as the most important means of understanding a character, the only other signifiers that the audience can glean from the shot being vague indications of class or (lack of) vocation according to the choice and condition of the footwear.

The significance of (extremely) local affiliations, at points not seeming to extend beyond the block itself, is depicted as simultaneously liberating and entrapping. Though local affiliations cut across borders erected by class, ethnicity, gender and vocation, they do not have the power to combat national institutions, represented in this film by the police. The importance of local identity is comically conveyed in the film through a dialogue between the two main white characters, Brewis and Sam, in which Brewis assumes that Sam shares his desire to flee the building (to go to a house party in Fulham), whilst Sam is determined not to be chased out of her home. This flouts his assumptions of a shared identity presumably drawn from ethnicity and/or perceived class and instead prioritises her local neighbourhood as a point of

identification. In a similar instance, Moses explains to Sam that they wouldn't have 'merked' her had they known she lived in the block, showing the gang's purported local integrity. However, the block – besides being the site of an alien invasion – is often visually represented as a place of entrapment, with the foreground of shots of the characters often sporting bars that mimic incarceration in a prison.

The opposing tropes of liberation and entrapment within local affiliations climax at the film's denouement, where Sam's protestations about the gang that 'I know them, they're my neighbours, they protected me' are ignored, as the bars of the police van close over Moses's face. The neighbourhood's celebration of Moses's heroic triumph over the aliens – echoed in chants of his name that penetrate the walls of the prison van – are ultimately futile, as Moses's fate lays in the hands of a national institution, not a local community. The comedy is not parochial – unduly prioritising the local at the expense of the global – but instead offers small glimmers of provisional resistance to national powers that are unique to local communities drawn together in perceived neighbourly affiliations.

With its large migrant population, the Brixton of the film represents both the global (through migrancy) and the local. Bill Ashcroft argues that such sites can be understood as Deleuzian 'smooth spaces' with the potential to challenge, 'because [such a space] mostly ignores, exceeds, surrounds and interpenetrates the striated space of the state.' Ashcroft goes on to say that the space 'is not in itself liberatory, but it is the medium of liberation because it is the medium of the glocal' (though he

fails to explain what he means by glocal in this sense).<sup>96</sup> Yet in the film – despite the intersection of the global and the local – national factors cannot be ignored, and it is national intervention that ultimately determines the outcomes of the various characters. The space imaginatively represented can only be the means of ideological liberation if the humour of the film serves to question the socio-political circumstances that are in operation.

The film also comically challenges multicultural policies that are based in the assimilation of minority communities. This is again achieved on a local level, where Brewis – a middle-class student living at home and off his parents' wealth – represents a minority in the film due to his elevated class status. Whilst all of the members of the gang speak in London Jamaican, whether they are Caribbean in origin or not, the dialect is presented as organic and unaffected in this circumstance; however, when Brewis attempts to adopt the dialect he is cast as Other, an uninvited outsider to the linguistic group.<sup>97</sup> When Brewis switches from an RP accent whilst talking to his Dad on the phone to London Jamaican when he meets the gang, he is shown as trying to perform certain cultural signifiers to assimilate to the group. Brewis changes his grammar to include double negatives and words like 'shizzle' as an attempt to assimilate, but his failure to master the rhetoric marks him as an outsider and at the same time the awkward silences following his contributions render him laughable.

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<sup>96</sup> Bill Ashcroft, 'Transnation' in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. by Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 72-85 (p. 80).

<sup>97</sup> The dialect is often colloquially termed 'Jafaican', although this term has problematic connotations of inauthenticity and is often used to lament the passing of a linguistic norm that predates mass migration to Britain from the Caribbean. See further Mara Logaldo, "'Only the immigrants can speak the Queen's English these Days" but all kids have a Jamaican accent: Overcompensation vs. urban slang in multiethnic London', in *From International to Local English – and Back Again*, ed. by Roberta Facchinetti, David Crystal and Barbara Seidlhofer (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 115-46.

A particularly funny scene involves the gang discussing what they should do with the alien that they have captured and killed, joking about calling Simon Cowell regarding a potential ‘Alien’s Got Talent’ show, whilst passing around a spliff and laughing at each other’s jokes. Brewis, previously at the edge of the scene, enters the room saying ‘jokes man, jokes’ to be greeted by a group of hostile faces. A low-angle shot is used to look up at Brewis, but rather than showing the usual power associated with the shot, it suggests dislocation, as he is being judged by the group sitting at the eye-level of the shot. This shot shifts the social norm, as we look with the gang up at Brewis, symbolically indicating that cultural and linguistic norms are created by the majority, and in Cornish’s film, unlike the outside world, Moses’s gang forms the majority. When Brewis drops the affected accent and pretences of poverty he is taken more seriously and incorporated into the group. Cornish’s comedy of reverse assimilation (from the mainstream to the minority) foregrounds the farcical performance required in efforts to assimilate.

*Attack the Block* strives to make gang members the subjects rather than the objects of representation by bringing to the forefront processes of observation and representation. As with *Four Lions*, Cornish’s film also plays with the construction of fear, distinguishing between perceived and actual threat. Comedy is evoked by means of a change in discourse: as the gang runs out of Ron’s apartment shouting ‘let’s get tooled up blud!’ he observes ‘quite sweet really, ain’t they?’ thereby associating their acquisition of weapons with childish play rather than violent threat. Regarding the gang members as children highlights their innocence and vulnerability, something that is highlighted after this comic precursor by focussing on the young ages of the gang

members. Moses – who is portrayed as the leader and the most experienced – is only 15 and still owns a Spiderman duvet.

Both the film's comedy and its pathos serve to refocalise the way that gangs are considered, undermining essentialising discourses. Whilst the process of undermining is sometimes transparent and a little heavy handed (““This ain't got nothing to do with gangs.” “Or drugs. Or violence in rap music. Or video games””), at other times it is more subtle, with Sam acting as a foil for stereotypes about gangs. Whereas Sam swears frequently and is told off for having a ‘potty mouth,’ members of the gang use bad language rarely and their discourse downplays the seriousness of events, for example saying ‘the man’s a sausage’ of Hi Hatz, who has just pointed a gun at them. Dialogue like the above also serves comically to deflate the threat that is posed: calling a man a sausage as opposed to swearing refuses to give credit to threat, even when the threat is (diegetically-speaking) real. Stephen Hessel argues that ‘[d]espite [...] openness to the incursion of fear, the expectation of laughter postpones the very same anxiety that produces it.’<sup>98</sup> It can similarly be argued that Cornish, like Morris, *deliberately* offers laughter as an alternative response to cultural anxieties thereby reducing the propensity for fear.

By way of conclusion, I will make reference to both *Four Lions* and *Attack the Block* to demonstrate how this recent wave of postcolonial comedy differs from what went before. Firstly, it is notable that there are decidedly fewer female characters in the latter two films that I have discussed: Omar’s wife, Sofia, has the largest female role, but still has very little screen time in *Four Lions*, whilst (the androgynously-named)

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<sup>98</sup> Stephen Hessel, ‘Horrorifying Quixote: The Thin Line between Fear and Laughter’ in *Fear Itself: Reasoning the Unreasonable*, ed. by Stephen Hessel and Michele Huppert (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 23-41 (p. 28).

Sam is the only female character to accompany the gang in *Attack the Block*, other women being shown only briefly in their homes. This marks a change in focus from the decidedly more universal, and somewhat less controversial ‘battle of the sexes,’ which warranted the plethora of strong female characters, to culturally specific issues related to class, violence and religion in the most recent films.<sup>99</sup> In the second generation the focus is on young men, who have a well-documented history of stigmatisation and disenfranchisement from society: the homosocial bonds represented in the films create an alternative site of power in the face of economic recession, prejudice and Islamophobia.

Unlike the films considered in the ‘laughing through the tears’ section, Morris’s film reinstates religion in comedy, with a religious belief – however confused – being the ruling ideology for the majority of the characters. This marks a shift in contemporary society, where especially since the 9/11 and 7/7 bombings there has been an increased pressure on British Muslims to articulate precisely their national and religious affiliations, with high-profile commentators like Ziauddin Sardar bemoaning the ‘constant requirement’ to provide explanations for incidents such as 7/7.<sup>100</sup> Sardar roots the increased publicity and politicisation of British Muslim citizens in a number of causes, from the politicisation of Pakistani Barelvis at the end of the twentieth century that was eventually paralleled in Britain’s (majority Barelvi) Muslim population, to the ‘toxic environment’ created by British foreign policy.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> I realise that in the broader terminology class, violence and religion are not culturally specific, but particular manifestations brought to light in the films are.

<sup>100</sup> Ziauddin Sardar, *Balti Britain: A Provocative Journey through Asian Britain* (London: Granta, 2008), p. 295.

<sup>101</sup> Sardar, pp. 316-17, 325.

Yet, in the very year of the 7/7 bombings, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik suggest that ‘loss of transcendence [...] characterises the modern [presumably Western] condition.’ They argue that this loss of transcendence can inspire both comedy and terror as a Manichean view of good and evil collapses, leaving uncertainty in its place.<sup>102</sup> It might, therefore, be argued that because of the seemingly ‘modern’ use of comedy that derives humour from what could otherwise be terrifying, the intended audience is not religious, and might as such view religion ironically or as posing a subjective rather than objective perspective on the world. This would tie in with what Horner and Zlosnik argue is the telos of the comic: ‘throw[ing] the frames of social reference into doubt and mak[ing] moral judgement appear a matter of relativity.’ In this manner they suggest that ‘the comic can function as intellectually liberating, despite closures that appear to be conservative in restoring the individual to society.’<sup>103</sup>

However, it is at this point that I argue that both Morris’s and Cornish’s films differ from ‘modern’ comedy and enable a social challenge: they do not have conventionally happy endings and as such do not serve to return the individual to society. I support Umberto Eco’s view that ‘carnival can only exist as *authorized* transgression’ [emphasis in original] through which the individual is sated (or sedated) and returned to society for the remainder of the year.<sup>104</sup> Morris’s and Cornish’s films bring the dominant society into question by refusing to provide comic resolution. Whilst *Four Lions* finishes with all four of the ‘lions’ having blown themselves up, *Attack the Block*’s protagonist – Moses – is taken away in a police van, despite the

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<sup>102</sup> Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> Horner and Zlosnik, p. 15.

<sup>104</sup> Umberto Eco, ‘The Frames of Comic “Freedom”’ in *Carnival!*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984), pp. 1-9 (p. 6).

neighbourhood's noisy support of him.<sup>105</sup> As such, transgression is not 'authorized' in the films and their uncomic endings make them modally rather than generically comic.

In sum I have argued that all of the films considered are works of postcolonial British comedy, yet what this has meant for each generation has shifted according to contemporaneous social prejudice and political ideals. The desire expressed by the first wave of films is for a happily multicultural society facilitated through an ostensibly inclusive form of comedy. Yet these films are sometimes problematic for their inclination to repress social problems in pursuit of a utopian ideal and for subordinating to a white mainstream hegemony. However, without the work achieved by this first wave of postcolonial British filmmakers, later cinematic output – with its darkly ironic tone that assumes the luxury of stereotypes not being taken at face value – may not have been possible. Yet the later films diverge from their predecessors by instead addressing what (and who) is repressed in such utopian multicultural desires, focussing on fears exacerbated through hysteric media that affect particular migrant groups. These films posit laughter as an alternative response to a sense of threat, and in doing so critique a society driven by the production of cultural fears.

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<sup>105</sup> Moses is nominally linked both to Sam Selvon's Trinidadian Moses Aloetta (central to his sequence of Windrush-generation London novels) and to the Christian Old Testament leader, who acted through anger, often made unpopular choices and was denied entry to the Promise Land but is nevertheless regarded as a great leader.

## Chapter Four

### **‘And we pursued English roses as we pursued England’: Consuming Desires from National Romance to Subcultural Urban Fiction**

This chapter considers desires that are explicitly expressed through motifs of sex and consumerism in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), Karline Smith’s *Moss Side Massive* (1994) and *Full Crew* (2002), Gautam Malkani’s *Londonstani* (2007) and Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal’s *Tourism* (2006). In previous chapters I have effectively performed a psychoanalytic reading of texts, bringing to light the textual unconscious of repressed desires and fears expressed in the genres of Bildungsroman, Gothic and comedy. The desires that I examine in this chapter have a more integral relationship to the genres they participate in, as those genres are defined through consumerism (consumerist desires) and romance (erotic desires). This chapter also differs from what has gone before in its approach to genre, as rather than focussing on one relatively self-contained genre, I discuss various sub-genres that place consumerism and sex (or ‘shopping and fucking’) as central to their workings. It is necessarily innovative in its synthesis of a range of economic, psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories in order to arrive at a useful means of conceptualising the related genres of ‘national romance’ and ‘subcultural urban fictions.’

It would be naïve to discuss consumerist desires without taking into account the market forces behind the postcolonial fiction that I examine. I therefore build upon and extend the work done by Graham Huggan and Sarah Brouillette on the marketing of postcolonial literature, by similarly foregrounding consumerist concerns and

extending this criticism to cover authors that have not attained the same commercial or academic prestige to date. Attention to the marketing of postcolonial literature also means that (contrary to previous chapters) I analyse the outer packaging as well as the inner workings of many of the novels in question. In other words, as well as mapping the various expressions of desire played out *within* the novels, I also consider how the books – and their authors – are advertised and sold to the public. I explain my theorisation of desire in the texts in the following subsections.

### **Postcolonialism and the Fetish**

In this chapter I explore the way that fetishisation, in both the Freudian and the Marxist senses of the term, is used to represent the psychological and economic systems of postcolonial Britain. Laura Mulvey's *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) brings together sexual and economic theories in a useful way through her observation that Freudian and Marxist theories converge and diverge around notions of fetishism. This term was historically employed to 'encapsulate the primitive, irrational, beliefs that were associated with Africa' but is used 'ironically' by both Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx to denote 'irrationalities' permeating 'bourgeois economics and its psyche.'<sup>1</sup> For Freud, fetishism is the means by which an object that is 'very inappropriate for sexual purposes' (cited instances including feet, shoes, hair and underwear) becomes the primary sexual object.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that fetishism involves misrecognition of value in terms of what Freud considers the only valid sexual aim (heterosexual intercourse). Marx similarly uses the concept of fetishism to describe the incorrect substitution of value, stating that '[t]he mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity [falsely] reflects the social

<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 239-92 (p. 249).

characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves.'<sup>3</sup> Marx likens the endowment of autonomy to 'products of labour' to 'the misty realm of religion' in which similar autonomy is granted to what the philosopher (in his typical dismissal of religion) considers to be simply 'the products of the human brain.'<sup>4</sup>

The concept of fetishism is employed by both theorists, Mulvey argues, 'in an attempt to explain a refusal, or blockage, of the mind, or a phobic inability of the psyche, to understand a symbolic system of value, one within the social and the other within the analytic sphere.' Yet, as she remarks, there are important differences between the two approaches, notably that the Marxist approach denotes a 'problem of inscription' in which the exchange value of commodities is hidden, whilst the Freudian approach 'flourishes as phantasmatic inscription' in which 'excessive value' is ascribed to 'objects considered to be valueless by the social consensus.' Mulvey summarises that '[i]n one case, the sign of value fails to inscribe itself on an actual object; in the other, value is over-inscribed onto a site of imagined lack, through a substitute object.'<sup>5</sup>

The contradictory results of fetishisation, I argue, are interestingly explored in the following novels, in which shopping and sex, consumerism and consummation, symbolic value and economic value are brought into close proximity. Though the novels do not talk of fetishism explicitly, it will become apparent through my analysis that they implicitly evoke fetishisation of either the Other (in novels marketed around their exotic qualities) or the Self (in subcultural texts). Fetishisation is signalled by

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 164-65.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Mulvey, p. 2.

misrecognising the value of objects, or by deliberately overvaluing them in order to create an alternate hierarchy (replacing capital with subcultural capital). Fetishisation serves as an index for the values placed on people and objects in postcolonial Britain, which provides the socio-political and economic backdrop for the novels I consider.

I demonstrate that in the Marxist sense of the term, real relationships between people(s) are reduced to chains of production and consumption, with products standing in for experiences, lifestyles or values that the consumer may or may not actually possess. Postcolonial Britain itself becomes an idea that can be sold, and greedily consumed or hastily rejected by its subjects. I also apply a Freudian paradigm, in which excessive value is placed on certain 'ethnic' objects (books themselves, and the collections of exotic paraphernalia that readers come across in the novels) that have no function in uniting the national body politic in a meaningful way. Graham Huggan's analysis of the role of commodity fetishism in the case of marketing postcolonial authors and texts reflects this Freudian language:

These three aspects of commodity fetishism – mystification (or levelling-out) of historical experience; imagined access to the cultural other through the process of consumption; reification of people and places into exchangeable aesthetic objects – help these books and their authors acquire an almost talismanic status.<sup>6</sup>

Though I have, thus far in this thesis, cited Freudian concepts of desire, for the purposes of this chapter I construe desire as productive, in an endless circle of desire, consumption (in which satiation is always deferred by a market that promises more)

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<sup>6</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 19.

and more desire. This is quite different from Freud's emphasis on the necessary repression of pleasure, in which 'the motor force of unpleasure shall have acquired more strength than the pleasure obtained from satisfaction.'<sup>7</sup> We might consider instead a Deleuzian construction of desire, where this lack is a 'deliberate creation' and 'function of market economy [...] the art of a dominant class'.<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari challenge Freud's notions of desire and repression in their conceptualisation of the Freudian unconscious as something that is 'capable of nothing but expressing itself – in myth, tragedy, dreams,' thereby providing an interpretation of the unconscious that robs it of its function as a producer.<sup>9</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, by contrast, 'desire is productive' and its product 'real,' meaning that 'social production is purely and simply desiring-production itself under determinate conditions.'<sup>10</sup> To make the critical shift from Freud to Deleuze and Guattari effectively uproots desire from the domain of the psyche and places it instead in the realm of the marketplace.

### **The Postcolonial Literary Marketplace**

In order to bring discussions of desire and consumption to bear on analysis of postcolonial literature, I now turn to the literary marketplace. Pierre Bourdieu conceptualises the literary arena as a 'Field of Cultural Production' in a critical work of the same name, arguing that each literary work is 'subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions.' Bourdieu's analysis situates each literary oeuvre in a field determined by the ever-shifting positions of other works in a field organized around 'the structure of the

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<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Repression', in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 568-72 (p. 569).

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pp. 26, 29.

distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of external or special profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field.’<sup>11</sup> Though convincing in its appraisal of the field, it says little of the roles that authors themselves might play in situating their work or engaging with market forces.

For Michel Foucault, the author has a crucial (but largely incidental/passive) role to play, his/her ‘function’ being to ‘characterize the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society.’<sup>12</sup> Though Foucault foreshadows postmodern rhetoric in his assertion that the author is dead, ‘a victim of his own writing,’ he suggests that there is nevertheless an ‘author function.’<sup>13</sup> The author as a determining force for deciphering meaning in the text might be dead, but the author as an icon embodying a certain set of discourses and cultural cache – or, we might say, an author that can be sold to hungry consumers – is alive and well. This perhaps equates to an over-valuation (Freudian fetishisation) of the role of the authors, yet it is incontrovertible that this fetishisation is a crucial tool of the literary market.

Graham Huggan builds on and updates Bourdieu’s work (which largely focuses on a history of the literary field of production in France). Despite criticisms that Bourdieu’s model has received for its ‘over-schematised distinctions and, in particular, for its attempt to fix the class positions of different consumer publics,’ it is, for Huggan, ‘useful, nonetheless, in suggesting how postcolonial writers/thinkers

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<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘What is an author?’ in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113-38 (p. 124).

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, p. 117. For more on the postmodern death of the author see Barthes.

operate within an overarching, if historically shifting, field of cultural production.’ Huggan explicitly assesses the two ‘regimes of value’ into which he understands the relevant field to be divided: postcolonialism, which he describes as ‘an anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the faultlines of literary and cultural texts,’ and postcoloniality, which is ‘largely a function of postmodernity: its own regime of value pertains to a system of symbolic, as well as material, exchange in which even the language of resistance may be manipulated and consumed.’<sup>14</sup> The struggle between these ‘regimes of value’ leads Huggan to question the ‘varying degrees of complicity between local oppositional discourses and the global late-capitalist system in which these discourses circulate and are contained.’<sup>15</sup> The distinction that Huggan makes serves to highlight the tensions inherent in the production and consumption of postcolonial literature. However, I do not differentiate between the two terms in my own work, as I believe that to do so serves to valorise and protect postcolonialism at the expense of postcoloniality, when the terms would be better understood as mutually dependent. Terminology that attempts to divorce the site of production from the site of consumption obfuscates a more complex and nuanced relationship that Huggan himself explores in his analysis of specific texts and the relationships constructed between authors and readers.

In a world in which (postcolonial) authors are increasingly self-conscious regarding the politics of globalisation and market economies, there is a profusion of novels that explicitly engage with motifs of production, desire and consumption, inviting readers to witness and critique the mechanisms of the global capitalist system first hand. Huggan’s analysis engages with this booming field in order to interrogate the ironies

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<sup>14</sup> Huggan, pp. 5, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Huggan, p. vii.

of the purportedly avant-garde political work of postcolonial narratives that seem at odds with the ‘exoticising’ marketing engines that produce them, noting that ‘a remarkable discrepancy exists between the progressiveness of postcolonial thinking and the rearguard myths and stereotypes that are used to promote and sell “non-Western” cultural products in and to the West.’<sup>16</sup> Huggan’s work has proven to be highly influential for conceptualising the strategies that postcolonial authors employ in order to position their works in relation to the market, and I will reference some of these strategies in my subsequent discussion of the novels. However, his work only focuses on the elite end of the postcolonial literary market, which, as I will outline more fully below, is problematic for itself being dictated by market forces, excluding those authors that have (for reasons other than literary merit) not found such favour with the publishing market.

Sarah Brouillette undermines Huggan’s analysis by contesting that his work is based on a false or unjustified premise:

His critique of an unspecified global reader in pursuit of exotic access to what is culturally ‘other’ is what allows him to identify, and identify with, an elite group of distinguished consumers said to apprehend texts in a more responsible way.<sup>17</sup>

Brouillette distinguishes her own (ironically similar) study from Huggan’s by understanding ‘strategic exoticism, and likewise general postcolonial authorial self-consciousness’ as evidenced in the novels, to be based upon a set of ‘assumptions shared between the author and the reader, as both producer and consumer work to

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<sup>16</sup> Huggan, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 5-6.

negotiate with, if not absolve themselves of, postcoloniality's touristic guilt.'<sup>18</sup> Though Brouillette assures us that she does not subscribe to Huggan's logic 'that separates the authentic from the inauthentic, the insider from the outsider, in an endless cycle of hierarchical distinction and counter-distinction,' the literary analysis that she then undertakes is largely dependent on a similar set of tropes and authors to those investigated by Huggan.<sup>19</sup> The reason for this is perhaps that, in the same vein as Foucault, Brouillette understands postcolonial authors to have little hope of 'autonomy from the commercial sphere.'<sup>20</sup> In support of this thesis, she then focuses only on authors that fit the bill of accruing a wide readership whose function is produced through ferocious marketing campaigns. There is not a problem with this recourse to the literary elite *per se*, and indeed much of my own thesis has been concerned with commercially successful authors; however, it appears neglectful when discussing the literary marketplace to only consider the literary equivalent of Harrods. Brouillette's analysis is precise and interesting, but fails in its pretence at describing a general situation when she is in fact discussing only an elite sector of commercially successful authors who manifest at least partial complicity with their own market positioning.

The importance of being alert to capitalist mechanisms is highlighted by Neil Lazarus, who raises important questions regarding class and the material, capitalist basis of colonialism. In *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), Lazarus expresses his concern that '[w]ithin postcolonial studies [...] the core concepts of "colonialism" and even

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<sup>18</sup> Brouillette, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Brouillette, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Brouillette, p. 3.

“imperialism” are routinely severed from that of “capitalism”.<sup>21</sup> Making the crucial connection, as Lazarus does, between capitalism, imperialism and neo-imperialism means that it is more essential than ever to consider postcolonial novels both as works of ideology and as works of labour, with the capacity to both reflect and comment upon market systems. For Lazarus, the postcolonial novel is useful for conveying class relations in a number of ways. Crucially, he advocates that we attend to the *ways* in which the social conditions of existence are represented, ‘since it is here that writers’ own attitudes to what is being expressed come into focus; and here also, therefore, that the nature and level of readers’ commitment to the text is negotiated and secured.’<sup>22</sup> As such it is important to attend to narrative distancing, self-irony and strategic exoticism in order to understand the author’s own relationship with the system that they (and we as readers) are to some extent inevitably complicit in.

Both Huggan and Brouillette focus on a certain kind of author to make their cases: those that are cosmopolitan, mobile, award-winning celebrities, who speak of global and local politics with the authority attendant upon those that have both attended some of the world’s best universities and accrued international stardom (such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, J. M. Coetzee and Chinua Achebe). Clearly there is a place for such arguments, but they offer a skewed perspective of the market as a whole, in which the privileged, fund-accruing, celebrity few are taken as representative of what is in fact a far more diverse (and largely less-moneyed) field. In an attempt to partially correct this imbalance, this chapter examines the representation of consumerism and market-driven desires in relation to writers occupying a wider range of positions in the field of literary production, starting with ‘celebrity’ authors

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<sup>21</sup> Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Lazarus, pp. 47-48.

Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, before moving onto the case of marketing (in) Zadie Smith and finally considering authors that have not (yet) gained such celebrity status or financial independence: Karline Smith, Gautam Malkani and Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal.

The rationale behind choosing these authors is that market forces often dictate literary criticism both in broadsheets and academic journals, meaning that those postcolonial authors that have not attained ‘elite’ status are frequently doubly excluded. Rushdie and Kureishi have both gained celebrity with largely middle class audiences in the West and beyond: their writing is technically complex and of the sort that is often taught on University syllabuses. The marketing of Zadie Smith immediately placed her in the same literary terrain as these two authors as she was hailed a voice for multicultural Britain before her first novel had even hit the shelves. Yet the marketing behind the latter three authors is quite different.

To open my discussion of Malkani, Dhaliwal and Karline Smith I consider the books’ ‘paratexts,’ which Gérard Genette defines as accompaniments to the written text, including ‘an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations’ that ‘surround and extend’ the text and ensure its “reception” and consumption.’<sup>23</sup> In *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World*, Richard Watts builds on what he describes as Genette’s ‘synchronic’ approach to the paratext, which ‘is interested in that which remains more or less the same in the paratext over time’ and goes on to study the paratext ‘diachronically,’ looking at ‘what changes over time [...] and how the particular context in which a work is published

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<sup>23</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1.

might be related to those changes.<sup>24</sup> Watts's diachronic perspective involves recounting the move from colonial paratexts, in which 'the texts were marked as foreign and aspiring to Frenchness,' to decolonising paratexts in which 'they were marked as foreign and aspiring to foreignness, to independence,' and finally to the packaging of postcolonial literature, which is 'not just the result of a shift in the politics of the paratext, although that thematic content is important. Rather it comes more as a result of a shift in its poetics, or [...] in its architecture.'<sup>25</sup> Watts does for paratexts what Huggan does for texts, exposing the shift in complicity between postcolonial authors and their markets.

Though my work is concerned with postcolonial literature with a different set of social and geographical concerns to those that Watts analyses, it is important in any context to consider where the marketing and/or packaging of postcolonial literature has come from and the power that it can have.<sup>26</sup> As Watts asserts, 'it is in the paratext that the struggle over who has the right to mediate and who maintains the authority to present and interpret this literature is fought.'<sup>27</sup> To cite a British case in support of my concern with the (literal and metaphorical) packaging of texts, Corinne Fowler's 'A Tale of Two Novels: Developing a Devolved Approach to Black British Writing' traces the 'differing fortunes' of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Joe Pemberton's *Forever and Ever Amen* ('also a critical success'), 'examin[ing] the commercial and cultural logic by which novels are coded as worthy of national and international

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Watts, *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World* (Lanham: Lexington, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Watts, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> For more on Francophone relationships with exoticism, see Charles Forsdick, 'Revisiting Exoticism: From Colonialism to Postcolonialism', in *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 46-55; Jean-Marc Mourra, *Lire L'Exotisme* (Paris: Dunod, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Watts, p. 4.

readerships by corporate publishers and high street retail outlets.’<sup>28</sup> Among reasons that Fowler arrives at for the novels’ ‘differing fortunes,’ she suggests that ‘literature is frequently co-opted [by publishers] into the project of constructing a national consciousness’ and that ‘[c]orrespondingly, a novel’s ability to conjure up a sense of place in ways that trigger positive cultural associations has important commercial implications.’<sup>29</sup> My response to this is to examine a range of texts, including those that determinedly do *not* paint a happy picture of postcolonial Britain and those that are set outside London’s metropolitan centre. In doing so, I aim to heed Fowler’s call for academics to ‘maintain[] a critical perspective on the corporate publishing industry.’<sup>30</sup>

Malkani’s, Dhaliwal’s and Karline Smith’s paratexts all point to a different kind of marketing campaign to those provided for Rushdie’s, Kureishi’s and Zadie Smith’s novels. The garish yellow cover, pink font and demotic title of Malkani’s *Londonstani* suggests that it is aimed at a younger audience, self consciously marketed as low-brow with street cred by sporting a single cover image of an attractive urban Asian man, who gazes disinterestedly into the middle distance. Dhaliwal’s novel *Tourism* has the kind of front cover that makes the novel embarrassing to read in public, comprising a close up of a woman’s breast exposed in a see-through blouse and an overlaid tag line in red, ‘sexy...shocking and touched with genius’ (supplied by self-described ‘militant feminist’ Julie Burchill).<sup>31</sup> The narrator’s commodification of women, which forms a major theme of the novel, is reflected on the cover. Karline

<sup>28</sup> Corinne Fowler, ‘A Tale of Two Novels: Developing a Devolved Approach to Black British Writing’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43 (2008), 75-94 (p. 76).

<sup>29</sup> Corinne Fowler, p. 81.

<sup>30</sup> Corinne Fowler, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> She is described as such in interview with Julie Bindel, ‘I know we’ve had our spats’, *The Guardian*, 13 May 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/may/13/julie-bindel-burchill-feminism>> [accessed 10 May 2012].

Smith's novels *Moss Side Massive* and *Full Crew* appear to be exclusively marketed for urban youth, with cover images that indicate a predominant concern with gang culture (indexed through guns and conspicuously large signet rings). *Moss Side Massive* points to a specific geographic region (an inner-city Manchester district with a large migrant community and a bad reputation for riots and gun crime), whilst both cover photos are of black men, factors which serve to market the novels along lines of gender, ethnicity and locale. Both of Smith's novels are published by X Press, a press that 'has produced fiction dealing with black street life, marketed to appeal to a youthful, metropolitan black readership' with the 'serious objective' of 're-map[ping] the British inner-city's terrain, focussing attention on black social decay and institutionalized racism.'<sup>32</sup>

In different ways the marketing for these three authors resists the kind of postcolonial exoticism that Huggan and Brouillette have attributed to the authors they are concerned with: it does not mark them for consumption by a predominantly white, middle-class audience. There is, of course, more than one mode of exoticisation: the latter novels may stand accused of fetishising the violence and misogyny associated with the gangs and subcultures that they take as their focus and in doing so exoticising the subcultural members for a mainstream audience. I will, however, go on to argue that the target market for the novels is subcultural insiders, meaning that their paratexts can be seen to be less concerned about the exoticisation of the Other, and more concerned with creating an image that is worthy of subcultural capital.

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<sup>32</sup> Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 229, 230.

My aim to analyse a range of authors (in terms of celebrity and complicity with market forces) largely stems from debates surrounding cosmopolitanism, a term that has been read as connecting or distinguishing between contributing ideological and economic factors. Robert Spencer defines cosmopolitanism both as ‘a disposition [...] characterized by self-awareness, by a penetrating sensitivity to the world beyond one’s immediate milieu, and by an enlarged sense of moral and political responsibility’ and as ‘a set of economic structures and political institutions that correspond to this.’<sup>33</sup> The two strains, or meanings, of cosmopolitanism identified above have been variously endorsed or dismissed by a range of critics, yet Spencer attempts to reconcile them by concluding that ‘we must think of a way in which we can face up to and work politically within our uncosmopolitan present (a time [...] of immense enmity and inequality), without losing sight of the desirability and feasibility of a cosmopolitan future.’<sup>34</sup> He accompanies the utopian thrust of this understanding of cosmopolitanism with a call for postcolonial critics to ‘tread in the steps of postcolonial literature, which frequently combines an acute attentiveness to the havoc brought about by imperialism with a utopian desire to move beyond it.’<sup>35</sup> However if, as Spencer suggests, the present is uncosmopolitan due to inequality in the distribution of global capital, it is questionable to surmise that utopian strategies of reading and writing would be able to shape a more beneficent future *without revolutionising the global economy*. Spencer carefully isolates unfavourable economic and utopian ideological factors in a manner that only serves to illustrate their incompatibility.

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Spencer, ‘Cosmopolitan criticism’, in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. by Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, Sarah Lawson Welsh (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 36-47 (p. 36).

<sup>34</sup> Spencer, p. 40. For further debate on cosmopolitanism see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Allen Lane, 2006) and Paul Gilroy, ‘A New Cosmopolitanism’, *Interventions*, 7 (2005), 287-92.

<sup>35</sup> Spencer, p. 44.

Timothy Brennan offers a more realistic analysis of cosmopolitanism in *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, in which he illustrates the way that market forces determine the kind of books that can be written and thereby links the two strains of cosmopolitanism that Spencer attempts to separate. Brennan argues that '[t]he phenomenology of a "third-world literature" not only affects the reception, but in part dictates the outcome,' as authors 'tend to exist not as individuals but as elements in an intertextual coterie that chooses them as much as they choose it.'<sup>36</sup> If there is not a market for the authors, then chances of their novels' publication is clearly vastly limited. As different ideologies, geographical areas, stylistic or generic preferences or historical periods come into fashion, it dictates the subsequent market for postcolonial fiction.

### **Different Audience, Same Desire**

The final intention of this extended theoretical introduction is to provide a rationale for my inclusion of what might be seen as a disparate collection of novels in favour of what has heretofore been a thesis concerned with discrete genres of literature. The novels that I discuss might broadly be considered under two generic headings: 'national romance' and 'subcultural urban fiction.' However, I believe the similarities between them are strong enough that they be considered together as genres dealing with similar themes but aimed at different audiences. Initially the genres seem so diverse as to be unworthy of comparison: 'national romance' is a genre of literature in which a love story stands as an allegory for broader social relationships that form the make-up of the nation, whereas 'subcultural urban fiction' takes place inside a specific subcultural scene in a distinctly metropolitan area. However, I bring the texts together

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<sup>36</sup> Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1997), p. 203.

in recognition of their shared concerns with sexual desire, patterns of consumption and performative identities. The main distinction between the novels is that whilst the first three (by Rushdie, Kureishi and Zadie Smith) appear to be marketed to a mainstream, predominantly white audience, the projected audience of the latter four novels (by Karline Smith, Malkani and Dhaliwal) appears to be subcultural insiders, so the direction of the performances is shifted. Throughout the chapter I understand identity to be performative in the sense conveyed by Judith Butler, as ‘tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space, through a *stylized repetition of acts*,’ though it will become apparent that this performance of identity goes beyond the gendered analysis of Butler’s remit to also include performances of ethnic identity.<sup>37</sup>

**‘Ready to be anything they wanted to buy’: Performing Ethnic Identities in *The Satanic Verses***

In *The Satanic Verses*, both Gibreel and Saladin are actors, meaning that performance, audience and economic considerations are brought to bear on the way that the characters construct their identities. However, their mutual occupation is where the similarity ends: whilst Gibreel repeatedly acts in ‘theologicals’ based in India, donning a variety of costumes but consistently playing gods and supernatural beings, Saladin works for radio in Britain, where he is ‘the Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice’ (60). Whilst Gibreel is endowed with celebrity and devotion for his roles, Saladin and his female counterpart, Mimi Mamoulian ‘remain invisible, shedding bodies to put on voices’ (61).

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<sup>37</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 140.

Saladin's character is most relevant to this study, as he negotiates his personal and professional persona largely in Britain. Here, he experiences the institutional racism of the British media: he is 'the big star whose face is the wrong colour for their colour TVs' (61), consigned to hide his brown face behind voices and masks. Yet for all that Saladin's 'choice' to play these invisible roles is derided, it is nevertheless an economic decision: he provides the required performance in order to retain a job in a precarious market. However, he loses this job when his 'universe' shrinks (a universe being 'the total potential market for a given product or service') (264). It becomes apparent at this point that his ethnic identity has become a commodity, something that can be traded in, bought, or in this case, made redundant.

The quotation given as the subtitle to this section describes how Saladin's professional and/or economic choices are mimicked in his personal life. Jumpy Joshi jealously watches on as 'Chamcha came up, reeking of patchouli, wearing a white kurta, everyone's goddamn cartoon of the mysteries of the East, and the girl left with him five minutes later' (174). In Joshi's opinion '[t]he bastard [...] had no shame, he was ready to be anything they wanted to buy, that read-your-palm bedspread-jacket Hare-Krishna dharma-bum' (174): the language explicitly denotes Saladin's performed identity as a commodity, something that women want to own. Saladin is the novel's mimic man, yet he does not wield the subversive power with which Homi Bhabha accredits mimicry.<sup>38</sup> Though Saladin plays the role of the 'mimic men' in the sense of V. S. Naipaul's novel of the same name, these acts of mimicry (his disdain for subcontinental compatriots and manifest love of Britain) do not threaten white Britain, as socio-economic factors demarcate the range of identities from which Saladin can

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<sup>38</sup> See the subsection of Chapter Three entitled 'Postcolonial Comedy' for a discussion of Bhabha's concept of mimicry.

profit.<sup>39</sup> Huggan describes Saladin's mimicry as 'a symptom of his subjection to a vast, metropolitan-based image-making industry [...] that continues to manipulate his multiple cultural self-fashionings for its own financial ends.'<sup>40</sup> However, Saladin is not portrayed solely as the victim of an exoticising and/or racist society, because he is ultimately complicit with the system that exploits him.

Saladin's seduction of women is an allegory for his seduction of the nation, which is shown to be his ultimate object of affection. His wife laments that 'Chamcha was not in love with her at all, but with that voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit' (180). Saladin's personal and national romantic advances are interdependent in a manner reminiscent of the national romance, a genre that Doris Sommer defines as performing 'the marriage between Eros and Polis.'<sup>41</sup> Though concerned primarily with nineteenth-century Latin American fiction that deals with the foundation of new nations, Sommer's arguments regarding the interplay of desires in the national romance is incredibly useful in relation to its current manifestations in the contemporary British novel:

Desire weaves between the individual and the public family in a way that shows the term to be contiguous, coextensive as opposed to merely analogous. And the desire keeps weaving, or simply doubling itself at personal and political levels, because the obstacles it encounters threaten both levels of happiness.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See V. S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (London: Vintage, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Huggan, p. 93.

<sup>41</sup> Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 32.

<sup>42</sup> Sommer, p. 48.

Whilst I would not want to conflate the political concerns of early Latin American societies with contemporary Britain, romantic literature is similarly employed in the latter context to raise national questions, even if the questions asked and the resolutions offered are vastly different.

An important mutation in postcolonial British national romances of today is that they are not deployed as part of a political project of founding a united national body (as ‘part of a general bourgeois project to hegemonize a culture in formation’).<sup>43</sup> Though Eros and Polis are similarly interlinked in *The Satanic Verses* and subsequent texts that I turn to, the postcolonial authors in question often use these drives to critique Britain, demonstrating an increasingly less utopian concern with writing a new nation into being. By reading *The Satanic Verses*, in which erotic and political drives are paralleled, the perversion of what is shown to be an incredibly one-sided affair is exposed. Saladin occupies the position of the self-abasing lover: devoted, yet never deemed worthy of the affections of the beloved. Britain is portrayed as indifferent to the wooing of its immigrant peoples, yet is shown to be encouraging of a self-abasing attitude by buying into consumable ethnic identities when and where there is a market for them.

### ***Streets of My Heart, or Staged Marginality in The Buddha of Suburbia***

In an interview with Susan Fischer, Hanif Kureishi describes his last-minute decision to change the title of his first novel from *Streets of My Heart* to *The Buddha of Suburbia*, despite the novel’s focus on Karim rather than Haroon, the eponymous Buddha of the title. His choice, Kureishi asserts, is simply because the latter title

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<sup>43</sup> Sommer, p. 29.

sounds better; I will leave cynics to discuss the deliberate process of exoticisation that this canny marketing choice entails.<sup>44</sup> Though the given title does not refer to the protagonist, it is, however, metonymic of the novel's main preoccupations and strategies: staged marginality and consumable exotic identities. *The Buddha of Suburbia* belongs to the tradition of the Bildungsroman and follows the protagonist Karim Amir through his negotiation of what it means to be 'an Englishman born and bred, almost.'<sup>45</sup> Oscillating between heterosexual and homosexual relationships, between parents, between locations (the suburbs, London and, albeit imaginatively, India), between social classes, between a range of possible self-imposed identifications (including at various points English, French, African American, Indian) and between received labels (black, 'Paki'), Karim learns what it means to adopt and/or perform an identity.<sup>46</sup> Like Rushdie's protagonists, Karim is also an actor, which is an enabling device for addressing broader themes of performativity, staging, audience and improvisation.

Karim's blossoming acting career sees him in two roles, the first of which is Mowgli, and involves him assuming an Indian accent and sporting 'a loin-cloth and brown make-up, so that [he] resembled a turd in a bikini-bottom' (146). The irony of the faked accent and brown make-up required for Karim to fit the part is that he is ruthlessly informed that he has 'been cast for authenticity and not for experience' (147). Authenticity, it is apparent, is something imposed from the outside as a marker to increase perceived value and to suggest a certain ontological integrity. Problems

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<sup>44</sup> Hanif Kureishi, 'Interview with Susan Fischer', *Hanif Kureishi: In Analysis Conference*, Roehampton University (25 February 2012).

<sup>45</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 3. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>46</sup> For discussion of the socio-economic hierarchy of the range of suburbs that *The Buddha of Suburbia* covers, see Procter, *Dwelling Places*, pp. 145-53.

over the ‘authenticity’ that Karim brings to the part are exposed as Karim does not understand what is meant when he is asked for an authentic accent, by which the director means an Indian accent, not his native ‘Orpington’ one.

Karim’s performance is shown to collude with and fuel prejudiced attitudes. Aside from the dubious casting, the play is a take on *The Jungle Book*, the author of which is described by Haroon as ‘That bloody fucker Mr Kipling pretending to whity [sic] he knew something about India!’ (157). Overall, this leads Karim’s cousin Jamila to describe his performance as ‘pandering to prejudices – [...]. And clichés about Indians’ (157). The scene serves as an example of what Huggan has termed ‘[s]taged marginality’, described as ‘the process by which marginalised individuals or social groups are moved to dramatise their “subordinate” status for the benefit of a majority or mainstream audience’ (87). Theatre becomes, in the case of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, an allegory for society, where the processes of casting and staging and the composition of the audience (‘four hundred white English people’) are writ large (228).

But we should not necessarily take Karim’s apparent collusion in racial stereotyping at face value. Indeed, Huggan proceeds to argue that ‘[s]taged marginality is not necessarily an exercise in self-abasement; it may, and often does, have a critical or even a subversive function’ (87).<sup>47</sup> Karim’s performance could therefore be read as a parody of audience expectations, working with a series of overblown stereotypes that we must view as ironic. Strategic marginalisation, in this case, reveals more about the desires of the consuming audience than it does about the performer who is ‘moved’ to

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<sup>47</sup> See further Fatimah Tobing Rony’s *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle*, discussed in the ‘Laughing Through the Tears’ section of Chapter Three.

re-enact colonial subordination. But if the audience is unaware that they are witnessing a parody rather than an 'authentic' display of Indian-ness, then all the play succeeds in doing (as Jamila recognises) is to confirm preconceptions and to build upon foundations of prejudice. It is only with the extra remove and critical distance that we are granted as readers of the novel that the irony of Karim's performance is made explicit, largely through the motif of performance that runs throughout.

Karim's second acting role, in a play loosely based around class, is arrived at through improvisation, for which he initially takes his Uncle Anwar as inspiration. Anwar had, until recently, been undertaking a hunger strike to cajole his daughter Jamila into an arranged marriage with an Indian man that she had never met. The new approach to acting raises a different set of questions, as the representational onus is now on Karim rather than the director, leading Roger Bromley to suggest that 'Karim [...] embodies mimicry as an active process, not the passivity of tolerated "copies". As an actor he partly reverses the colonial appropriation.'<sup>48</sup> Bromley's use of the modifier 'partly' is integral to the sense of his sentence, however, as Karim's performances are still judged with the colonial audience in mind. Mimicry might be an active process, but one enacted within the dictates of the pre-existing (post)colonial order, which becomes the interpretational paradigm for minority performances.

The potential for racist/imperialist complicity is made apparent when Karim's mimicry raises problems within the acting troupe. Tracey, a black actress, tries to impress upon Karim the 'burden of representation' that she feels he should share<sup>49</sup>:

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<sup>48</sup> Roger Bromley, *Narratives for a New Belonging: Diasporic Cultural Fictions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 152.

<sup>49</sup> Procter, 'General Introduction', p. 7.

‘Anwar’s hunger-strike worries me. What you want to say hurts me. It really pains me! And I’m not sure we should show it! [...] I’m afraid it shows black people – ’

‘Indian people – ’

‘Black and Asian people – ’

‘One old Indian man – ’

‘As being irrational, ridiculous, as being hysterical. And as being fanatical.’

‘[...] It’s not a fanatical hunger-strike. It’s calmly intended blackmail.’ (180)

I understand this section of the novel to be a metafictional aside regarding the pressure on Kureishi as an author, in which the depiction of Anwar in his own artistic work is internally justified and in which we are assured that the characters should not be regarded as representative. Karim accordingly becomes little more than a mouthpiece for Kureishi when he answers Tracey’s rhetorical question ‘[w]e have to protect our culture at this time, Karim. Don’t you agree?’ with ‘[n]o. Truth has a higher value’ (181). Despite this protestation, Karim ultimately submits to external pressures and opts to draw on Jamila’s husband Changez for the part, choosing to betray the wishes of a friend in order to appease the rest of the cast.

The choices that Karim is obliged to make regarding performance magnify the quotidian construction of identity. Karim’s professional performances reflect his father’s identity construction: Haroon is the self-styled Buddha of Suburbia, visiting suburban households to guide people in ‘the Way’ through instruction, meditation and yoga (13). Yet whether it is performance or something more ostensibly permanent – history, roots, religion or culture – that is the ultimate determinant of identity is left unresolved in the novel. Karim describes his father as ‘a renegade Muslim

masquerading as a Buddhist' (16), yet when his Auntie Jean suggests the same, that he has been 'impersonating a Buddhist,' Karim retorts that '[h]e is a Buddhist' (44). A tension between whether Haroon is a Buddhist because that is how he chooses to construct his identity, or whether he is a Muslim because he was born one is left to play out, as Kureishi refuses to close down the debate.

What is certain is that the identity that Haroon constructs is a marketable one for which he finds a ready audience. Unlike the practising Muslim characters of the novel (Uncle Anwar, Auntie Jeeta, and to a certain extent Changez), who are financially poor and struggle with racist hostility and physical abuse, Haroon is socially mobile and financially relatively well-off (though this is largely the result of his extra-marital affair with the socially ambitious Eva). Furthermore, descriptions of Haroon focus on his exotic dress, his 'red and gold waistcoat and Indian pajamas' (31), whilst suburban homes are depicted in terms of their material products, in rooms cluttered with 'sandalwood Buddhas, brass ashtrays and striped plaster elephants' (30). Unlike one's history, a performative construction of identity is presented as something that money *can* buy. James Procter notes the shifting ontological paradigm that this represents: 'the suburban interior [...] crammed with material goods [...] distinguishes the semi-detached from the stark basements and bedsits of early postwar fiction where acts of production (work and the search for it) overshadowed rituals of consumption.'<sup>50</sup> In Kureishi's narrative, people define themselves by products that they consume: identity becomes a costume that can be donned, whilst lifestyle can be found in the pages of a magazine.

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<sup>50</sup> Procter, *Dwelling Places*, p. 146.

A consumable identity has national ramifications. Just as Charlie – son of Eva and lover of Karim – goes to America and sells ‘Englishness, [...] getting a lot of money for it’ (247), the marketing of marginality has implications for Britishness (or perhaps Englishness, in the terms of the novel). Huggan asserts that ‘[m]arginality [...] is a primary strategy of commodity culture, which thrives on the retailing of cultural products regarded as emanating from outside the mainstream.’<sup>51</sup> This could be read as reinforcing a hierarchy whereby margin dwellers are producers ripe for exploitation by mainstream consumers. However, it is at this critical juncture that the novel’s function as a national romance gains importance.

Though national romance has the potential to bring together otherwise disparate elements of society, it has not always been seen as a particularly revolutionary genre of literature. Further to Sommer’s criticisms as to its ‘culturally hegemonizing’ and ‘bourgeois’ tendencies (see above), Mary Louise Pratt’s work on imperial literature and travel writing figures ‘transracial love plots’ as a form of neo-colonisation or enslavement, in which ‘romantic love rather than filial servitude or force guarantees the wilful submission of the colonized’ and the ‘allegory of romantic love mystifies exploitation out of the picture.’<sup>52</sup> Whilst this would seem reductive applied to the present day, it outlines a history of racism played out in sexual intercourse that has uncomfortable parallels with *The Buddha of Suburbia*, in which Karim is exploited whilst participating in an orgy with his girlfriend, Pyke (his director), and his director’s wife. Pyke, who occupies a position of authority over the young actor, ‘insert[ed] his cock between [Karim’s] speaking lips’ without so much as asking (203) and ‘virtually ruptured’ him during anal intercourse (219).

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<sup>51</sup> Huggan, p. 94.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 97.

Kureishi's novel uses national romance (and I use the term 'romance' here in the loosest of senses, merely to denote sexual union) not to paper over inequalities with romantic platitudes, but to expose the transactions involved in various sexual affairs throughout the novel (of which there are many). Karim's traumatic sexual encounter is not dwelt upon in any significant manner, other than as a signal that 'the fucker was fucking [him] in other ways' (219). To a certain extent *The Buddha of Suburbia* has a similar function to Kureishi's earlier screenplay, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), which employs romance as a means of removing borders between classes and ethnicities in order to imagine a more utopian future.<sup>53</sup> However, the novel is far more complex than the film in terms of the workings of desire, as here a complex nexus of relationships does not allow the reader to simply will one relationship into being and in doing so identify with a national project.

Changez summarises the novel's philosophy accurately when he avows that 'in this capitalism of the feelings no one cares for another person' (215). Rather than relationships naïvely imagined to allegorise the happy coming-together of disparate social entities, *The Buddha of Suburbia* instead uses sexual relationships to describe a set of transactions that are rarely equal, whether explicitly financial (as in the case of Changez and his favourite prostitute, Shinko), commoditised (with the use of dildos), or exploitative (Karim's encounters both with Pyke and with a rather enthusiastic Great Dane). The extended version of the quotation cited in my chapter title reads:

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<sup>53</sup> *My Beautiful Laundrette* enables the temporary suspension of Thatcherite social norms of homophobia and racism by allowing second generation Pakistani migrant, Omar to be both the boss and the lover of the white, working class, ex-National Front supporter, Johnny. *My Beautiful Laundrette*, dir. by Stephen Frears (Film4, 1985).

And we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness and beauty, we stared defiantly into the eye of the Empire and all its self-regard – into the eye of Hairy Back, into the eye of the Great Fucking Dane. (227)

It follows that far from using relationships to present unification and provide a utopian reflection of the nation, sexual union is portrayed as a form of (post)colonial revenge; rather than writing back, Kureishi's characters fuck back, using sex as a weapon to turn back on those that have initially 'fucked' them.

### **National Bromance and Triangular Desire in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth***

'The hype began in the autumn of 1997. Zadie Smith was 21 and just down from Cambridge when her first novel was sold on a mere 80 pages for an advance rumoured to be in the region of £250,000.'<sup>54</sup> Zadie Smith, described in this article's title as 'young, black [and] British,' was sold to the public in advance of her novel, with the desire for the author's success illustrating a contemporaneous millennial desire for a new voice for British multiculturalism.

This mediation of desire, in which desire for a utopian national future is projected onto an upcoming novelist, is reflected in tropes of the novel itself. *White Teeth* has roots stretching historically from the Indian Mutiny of 1857 into the present day and geographically between Bangladesh, Jamaica and Britain. The action largely revolves around the tragicomic lives of three families: Bangladeshi Samad and Alsana Iqbal with their twins Magid and Millat, white Archie and Jamaican Clara Jones with their

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<sup>54</sup> Stephanie Merritt, 'She's young, black, British - and the first publishing sensation of the millennium', *The Observer*, 16 January 2000 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/jan/16/fiction.zadiesmith>> [accessed 12 March 2012].

daughter Irie, and Jewish Marcus and Joyce Chalfen with Joshua, the eldest of four sons. For the purpose of this chapter, I focus predominantly on the novel's portrayal of male homosocial bonds and the white femme fatale after returning briefly to the subject of performative identity. I am selective in my focus firstly because so much has already been said about this novel, and secondly in order to foreground the details pertinent to my consideration of sexual and consumerist desires.

In Kureishi's novel, the performance of identity is seen as a potentially liberating and elastic process offering a means of resistance to categorisation from the outside, despite its usual recuperation within a consumerist, capitalist world. By contrast, *White Teeth* pushes against the limits of hybridising, performative or discontinuous constructions of identity by restoring a sense of (predominantly colonial) history that cannot be so easily forgotten. Millat Iqbal, '[s]ocial chameleon,' constantly reconstructs his identity to fit in with different social situations.<sup>55</sup> His first serious social allegiance to a 'Raggastani' group follows what is by now a familiar model, characterised by consumable items such as films and music, and '[n]aturally there was a uniform' in which 'everything, everything, everything was Nike<sup>TM</sup>;' wherever the five of them went the impression they left behind was of one giant swoosh, one huge mark of corporate approval' (231-32).

Millat ultimately realises, however, that despite his efforts at performing a particular identity, there are stronger forces at play:

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

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<sup>55</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 269. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a filmmaker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; 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. (233-34)

Millat eventually eschews a marketable identity, instead joining a group with the acronym KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation) and going to Bradford to burn a (persistently unnamed) book. This marks the failure of identity as defined by consumable products and effective performances; if identity is performed then the roles available for ethnic minority characters are limited.<sup>56</sup>

*White Teeth* constructs desire as imitative in the Girardian sense, not moving directly from subject to object, but mediated through another desiring subject, who becomes the mediator of said desire, and often the 'rival'.<sup>57</sup> Though René Girard's definition refers to romantic triangles of desire between characters, it is equally applicable to an analysis of consumerist desires, in which products, lifestyles and personal grooming are sold via their mediation in advertising. Here, the triangle could be expressed as the desire for an object as mediated by advertising, which leads to more desire in a perpetual cycle. *White Teeth*'s Irie reverses the desire for the exotic we saw enacted in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, in a process that Philip Tew describes as 'domesticat[ing]

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<sup>56</sup> The narrow range of roles available for characters from ethnic minority backgrounds that forms a key theme of the novel is replayed in the cast of the novel's TV adaptation in which Om Puri (as Samad) plays a role that is virtually indistinguishable from his part in *East is East*, accompanied by a cast of actors that are familiar from the films analysed in the previous chapter, including Archie Panjabi and Nina Wadia, with the addition of *Small Island*'s Naomie Harris. *White Teeth*, dir. by Julian Jarrold (Channel 4 Television Corporation, 2001).

<sup>57</sup> Girard, pp. 14, 7.

the exotic [...] through the comic cruelty of self-knowledge.’<sup>58</sup> Finding no reflection in England, the ‘gigantic mirror’ that she looks into, Irie can only see herself as abnormal, whilst desiring to be ‘the same as everybody else’ more than anything (266, 284). When Irie goes to have her hair fixed and is asked what she requires, the answer she gives illustrates a mediated desire: she wants ‘[s]traight hair. Straight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair. With a fringe’ (273). The excess of adjectives used to describe the hair that Irie desires reads like an advertising campaign, suggesting that Irie’s desire for straight hair is mediated through the fetishisation of a lifestyle that such beautiful hair might offer.

Triangulated and mediated desire is also reflected in the novel’s relationships. Though *White Teeth* portrays a range of heteronormative marital, extra-marital and teenage relationships, I contend that the novel’s great romance is between Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, two old friends that were brought together through military service during the Second World War. The bond between Archie and Samad is the novel’s strongest: they make decisions together, meet and eat together on a daily basis and share with each other what they will never share with their wives, forming a close homosocial bond. Archie reminisces: ‘[s]ounds queer. But it’s the truth. Always Sammy. Through thick and thin. Even if the world were ending. Never made a decision without him in forty years’ (532). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick builds on Girard’s notion of triangular desire to theorise the bond formed between two men in their rivalry over a woman in order to ‘draw the “homosocial” back into the orbit of

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<sup>58</sup> Philip Tew, *Zadie Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 57.

desire', desire being 'an affective or social force.'<sup>59</sup> However, the homosocial bond in Smith's novel is not created over a shared object of desire; rather the two men play the key roles of a national romance by bringing together disparate elements of the community through a bond apparently stronger than romantic love: 'bromance,' in today's parlance.

'Bromance' played a key role in the recent TV series 'Make Bradford British,' a reality show designed to bring different communities together by forcing a select group of people to live together.<sup>60</sup> Though the programme has been justly criticised for its 'obsession with racial tension' that obscures other issues such as poverty, effectively turning Bradford into a 'single-issue city,' I was interested by what the series posited that it would take to make Bradford British.<sup>61</sup> The answer to this seemed to present itself in the blossoming bromance between Rashid, a devout Muslim who prays at the Mosque five times a day, and Damon, a skinhead who goes into the project thinking that Mosques are 'terrorist centres.' The programme's most compelling moments are constructed through a relationship between these members of Bradford's two most antagonistic groups. The couple find mutual respect, sharing plenty of back-slapping man-hugs, and the programme's debrief predominantly focuses on their story and their shared construction of Britishness as something vaguely connected to heteronormative family values and respect. The somewhat utopian implication is that if these men can find mutual friendship and respect then so too can the wider community. This is what I mean by 'national bromance': a genre

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<sup>59</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 1, 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Make Bradford British*, dir. by Martin Fuller (Love West Productions, 2012).

<sup>61</sup> Lanre Bakare, 'Make Bradford British failed to go beyond the racial stereotypes', *The Guardian*, 2 March 2012  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/mar/02/make-bradford-british-channel-4-race>> [accessed 18 March 2012].

with the same national agenda as national romance, but operating through the homosocial bond of two men.

If Archie and Samad are to be understood in the same light as Damon and Rashid, it is necessary to consider what the two characters bring to the table and how they negotiate their views to fuel the 'bromance.' Archie's initial opinion of Samad and Alsana is that they are 'not *those* kind of Indians (as, in Archie's mind, Clara was not that kind of black)' (54). Though Archie does not articulate exactly what 'those kind' of Indians (actually Bangladeshis) would be, it is apparent that his friends are somehow distinguished and considered to fall under a certain norm that 'others' deviate from. He falls foul of the tendency that Kathryn Perry has observed in her analysis of interviews with interracial couples, in which 'charm functions as a denial of blackness, reinvesting the interracial relationship with the same normalising invisibility of colour that white people believe their own whiteness to represent.'<sup>62</sup> In choosing to befriend Samad, Archie also denies his friend's difference. Samad has an opposing understanding of relationships between his children and the white majority; he is such a stickler for tradition that he refuses to see the younger generation's 'assimilation' as anything other than 'corruption' (190) but is also blind towards his own alcohol-consuming, adulterous hypocrisy. Unlike Damon and Rashid who develop positions of mutual respect to accommodate the other's beliefs, Archie and Samad change very little: this is a national bromance that operates with a mutual blindness rather than the mutual exchange of ideas and values.

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<sup>62</sup> Kathryn Perry, 'The Heart of Whiteness: White Subjectivity and Interracial Relationships', in *Romance Revisited*, ed. by Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 171-84 (p. 176).

A problem with homosocial bonding, or bromance, is its exclusion of women, especially when this bromance has wider social or national implications. This is apparent in the misogynist overtones evident in Smith's novel, in which Britain is portrayed as a wanton temptress. Poppy Burt-Jones – a caricature of a naïve liberal white woman with a predilection for the exotic – is portrayed as representative of white women in general, and also with the corrupting tendencies of Britain as a nation. During his brief infatuation and fling with Poppy, Samad complains: 'I have been corrupted by England, I see that now – my children, my wife, they too have been corrupted. [...] And now it seems this final temptation has been put in front of me. To punish me, you understand' (144). Corruption at the hands of the nation and temptation at the hands of his sons' music teacher are pushed into close proximity, suggesting their similar aims.

Using a single woman to represent an entire nation has a long (and problematic) literary tradition, though this woman is more frequently placed in the role of mother. Elleke Boehmer describes gendered politics involved in the representation of the (post)colonial nation as follows: '[i]n practice, [...] and certainly in the operation of its iconographies and spectacles of power, nationalism operates as a masculine *family drama* [...], based on [...] gendered and unequal images of family roles.'<sup>63</sup> Samad's trajectory 'from one brown mother country into the pale, freckled arms of an imperial sovereign' traces the shift from family romance to national romance, drawn along the lines of sexual rather than familial love with the allusion to 'pale, freckled arms' that suggests intimacy and embrace (162). I support Maurice Godelier's argument that '[s]ex-related differences between bodies are continually summoned as testimony to

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<sup>63</sup> Boehmer, p. 28.

social relations and phenomena that have nothing to do with sexuality. Not only as testimony to, but also for testimony for – in other words as legitimisation.<sup>64</sup> By equating Poppy with a national body politic, the novel effectively legitimises the misogynist dismissal of (white) women as corrupters and temptresses.

My analysis of Samad's legitimising misogynist tendencies might seem a little hard given that he is frequently parodied and revealed to be a hypocritical character. However, where Samad is redeemed in the novel through his good intentions, there is no redemption for the two-dimensional Poppy. The trope of the seductive and corrupting white woman is one that also plays out in a number of Kureishi's works, including *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s Eva Kay, *The Black Album*'s Deedee Osgood and Rachel, Nasser's mistress in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. I consider the representative burden of the white woman further in my analysis of *Tourism* at the end of this chapter.

### **Minority Cultures/Subcultures**

This chapter has thus far dealt with markedly mainstream texts, in terms of the novels' wide appeal and considerable commercial successes. One way to conceptualise the move that I make in the second half of this chapter is to phrase it in terms of a shift from novels about characters from ethnic minorities that have been targeted at and consumed by mainstream audiences, to subcultural novels that are written about and marketed towards subcultural consumers. To talk about subcultures rather than minority cultures involves both a generational shift and a positional shift in terms of attitudes towards the often problematically homogenised mainstream. *The Satanic*

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<sup>64</sup> Maurice Godelier, 'The origins of male domination', *New Left Review*, 127 (1981), 3-17 (p. 17).

*Verses*, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth* might all be considered novels of (white) seduction, using romance as a trope to signify the (at times messy) union of disparate social factions. By contrast, subcultural studies (and texts) frequently focus on ‘resistance’ as a group’s defining logic. By tracing this shift, romance is replaced by conflict as the ruling metaphor for relationships in the latter half of this chapter.

For Ken Gelder, in his seminal work on *Subcultures* (2007), resistance is employed as a subcultural strategy for “winning space” back from the ruling classes, either in terms of territory or style (‘by using commodities, the signs of “dominant culture”, differently’).<sup>65</sup> Reading texts with an eye to subcultures should therefore enable an understanding of Britishness defined from the bottom up, rather than the top down (for John Clarke et al., subculture is always ‘subordinate and subordinated’ in relation to the ‘dominant culture’).<sup>66</sup> There are some remarkably comprehensive studies of subculture that usefully conceptualise the various histories, geographies, sociologies, politics and economies of subcultures, but for the sake of this study I will focus my outline of subculture around aspects pertinent to the case at hand.<sup>67</sup>

A key difference in studying subcultures as opposed to minority cultures is that the former are defined in opposition to both the ‘dominant’ culture and to their parents’ culture. Clarke et al. define this ‘double articulation’ of youth subcultures in terms of class, arguing that subcultural members’ lives are determined by a shared class position, but that they also ‘project a different cultural response or “solution” to the

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<sup>65</sup> Ken Gelder, *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 90.

<sup>66</sup> John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts, ‘Subculture, Cultures and Class [1975]’, in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 100-11 (p. 101).

<sup>67</sup> See further Gelder, *Subcultures*; Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (eds.), *The Subcultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

problems posed to them by their material and social class' through their subcultural styles and activities.<sup>68</sup> Though I posit ethnicity and postcolonial legacies (rather than class) as the predominant defining characteristics of experiences of Britishness today, parallels with the 'determining matrixes' of class are apparent. Like the working class youth that Clarke and company take as their subjects of scrutiny, the characters that populate the remaining novels also confront many of the same social problems as their parents (racism, alienation and disenfranchisement), yet simultaneously define against their parents in a way that is more collective and structured than individual teenage rebellion.

Subcultural affiliation treads the line between social exclusion and a self-imposed choice to distance oneself from society. Unlike *parents* in the novels by Malkani and Karline Smith, who frequently advocate cooperation and compromise across lines of religion and ethnicity despite experiences of racism, *younger characters* repeatedly reject such advances as the actions of 'coconuts' (brown on the outside, white on the inside). They prefer to adopt stances of hostility and self-elected removal from society that nevertheless indexes social alienation as a defining condition. Sarah Thornton summarises such a tension as follows: '[s]ubcultures, in other words, are condemned to and/or enjoy a consciousness of "otherness" or difference.'<sup>69</sup> This construction also illustrates the *potentially* liberating aspect of subcultural affiliation for those who may have had the labels of 'otherness' or difference thrust upon them (due to ethnic or class allegiances that mark a deviance from the 'norm'). Subcultural affiliation means that these labels can be transformed into a self-imposed choice or oppositional stance, recasting subcultural members as agents rather than victims.

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<sup>68</sup> Clarke et al., p. 101.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Thornton, 'General Introduction' in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-7 (p. 5).

Turning back to my original paradigms of consummation and consumption, or sex and shopping, it is apparent that subcultural identity has strong ties with these categories. The very title of Dick Hebdige's influential work on British subculture – *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) – suggests the crucial function of clothing in the construction of subcultural identity. For Hebdige patterns of consumption are crucial to the construction and display of subcultural identity as he argues 'it is through the distinctive rituals of consumption, through style, that the subculture at once reveals its "secret" identity and communicates its forbidden meanings.' He concludes that it 'is basically the way in which commodities are *used* in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations.'<sup>70</sup> This logic implies that subcultural consumption is deviant consumption, using products in unconventional or unintended ways. Objects are fetishised (ascribed excessive value) in subcultural circles, which shifts and modifies the way that capital is conceived of. For Hebdige, this deviance is embodied in the self-reification of subcultural members, as by '[c]onverting themselves into objects, those youths immersed in style and the culture of consumption seek to impose systematic control over the narrow domain which is "theirs" [...]. The posture is auto-erotic: the self becomes the fetish.'<sup>71</sup>

Another way of thinking through the relationship between subculture and consumerism is to consider 'subcultural capital,' a phrase that describes non-economic value in monetary terms. The majority of subcultures considered in Gelder and Thornton's *Reader* are from working class backgrounds and for Thornton

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<sup>70</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 103.

<sup>71</sup> Dick Hebdige, 'Posing ... Threats, Striking ... Poses: Youth, Surveillance and Display [1983]', in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 393-405 (p. 401).

‘[s]ubcultural capital is the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality and race are all employed in order to keep the determinations of class, income and occupation at bay.’ She highlights the inherent paradox of the term ‘subcultural capital,’ which ‘reveals itself most clearly by what it emphatically isn’t.’<sup>72</sup> However, the subcultural groups to be found in the literature that I analyse are from moneyed backgrounds, so I will move on to illustrate the way that conspicuous consumption of luxury items tallies with subcultural capital, as the term returns to its economic roots.

Something that unites all of the novels that I subsequently analyse is that the subcultural groups described are incredibly male-dominated and often overtly sexist. This is not an unusual charge to be levelled at subcultures – the accounts of which often orbit around young men. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber account for the apparent invisibility of girls’ subcultures by suggesting that ‘the very term “subculture” has acquired such strong masculine overtones.’<sup>73</sup> Malkani’s and Karline Smith’s novels are preoccupied with male gangs, with female characters playing only peripheral roles as wives, girlfriends or mothers without any comparable female grouping. However, the novels are internally critical of the homosocial relationships created within the gangs, as the peripheral female characters stand for alternative social groups (familial, romantic) that are detrimentally impacted by the privileged subcultural alliances between the young men. Desire – in both its sexual and its consumerist manifestations – is present in the novels *Moss Side Massive*, *Full Crew*,

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<sup>72</sup> Sarah Thornton, ‘The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital’, in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 200-09 (pp. 207-08).

<sup>73</sup> Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, ‘Girls and Subcultures [1975]’, in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 112-20 (p. 114).

*Londonstani* and *Tourism*. The male and often misogynist perspective voiced in the texts regularly conflates these two types of desire as women are objectified, consumed and discarded whilst products are described in sexualised language.

**‘I’m gonna make your heart and your profits rise’: Subculture and Parody in Karline Smith’s Moss Side Novels**

Smith’s *Moss Side Massive* is firmly situated in the gang culture of Manchester’s most infamous neighbourhood. The scene is set as Fluxy – leader of the Piper Mill Posse – is shot dead by an unseen assassin, which serves as the trigger for the subsequent rise in gang warfare between his old posse and the rival Grange Close Crew, who they believe to be responsible for Fluxy’s murder. Taking control of the Piper Mill Posse, Fluxy’s brother Jigsy vows revenge-at-any-cost and the remainder of the novel traces the downward spiral of attack and counter-attack, whilst the wives, girlfriends and mothers of the men involved can do nothing but watch on as their loved ones pursue this nihilistic course of action. The final showdown sees a car full of Piper Mill members and associates shot off the road with only Easy-Love Brown emerging from the wreckage. Piper Mill’s own Easy-Love turns out to have been the puppeteer pulling the strings that dictated the gang warfare, having ordered the hit on Fluxy so as to stir up rival antagonisms, with the ultimate aim of claiming leadership of the group for himself. Though the police cannot get enough evidence to convict Easy-Love of murder, he is arrested for taking policemen hostage.

*Full Crew* takes up the narrative four years later at the early prison-release of Easy-Love. Back on the streets he used to rule he is promptly beaten within an inch of his life and returned to hospital. Faced with the demise of his old crew he realises that he

will quickly have to organise himself a new one for protection against the gangs that have evolved in his absence. But it is a tough network that he must negotiate, requiring new allegiances and carefully-chosen loyalties. Teenager Danny Ranks, ruthless, violent, and a strong believer in retribution whether the offence is accidental or intentional, heads up the new Worlders Crew and sets out to destroy Easy from the moment of his release, determined not to lose his place at the top as the ex-con returns. Danny's main rival is Yardie Godmother Miss Small, who heads up the Dodge Crew. Her devoted gang of men provide her with protection and wealth, and in return become a kind of extended family, living, cooking and sharing together. But readers should not be tricked by the family dynamic of the gangs; in this money- and status-driven world, the business-like and corporate enterprises entered into mark a dog-eat-dog world where loyalty, trust and filial bonds are employed as bargaining tools in ruthless yet fragile hierarchies.

These novels map a Manchester (or 'Gunchester') that is intensely local, moving the reader through familiar sites and streets, but they also push out towards wider affiliations as Jamaican gangs and IRA members weave through the subplots.<sup>74</sup> Whilst gang warfare is not carried out across ethnic lines, the novel makes it explicit that the gang culture has historical roots, drives and explanations as the black DI Edwards recognises the historical legacy of a city that still has only four black students in its best school and whose residents view him as a traitor for choosing a job in the police force and becoming a 'beast bwai.'

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<sup>74</sup> Karline Smith, *Full Crew* (London: The X Press, 2002), p. 260. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

*Moss Side Massive* comes equipped with its own detailed subcultural geography and history; DI Edwards recalls his father telling him about the early stages of Commonwealth immigration in the 1950s and 60s:

In those days, rockers and the teddy boys were the main gangbangers. As well as being small-time criminals, the teds and the rockers spent their time threatening their new black neighbours and deemed certain clubs, cinemas and pool rooms, no go areas to black people. The young immigrants went about in small groups to defend themselves, and eventually formed their own gangs. When the teds and rockers faded out and the black community were well established in Moss Side and surrounding areas, the fighting became intra-racial. Neighbourhood wars heated up between Africans, Jamaicans and 'Smallies' from Barbados, Trinidad and St. Kitts. Such was the rivalry between the Jamaicans and their fellow Caribbean islanders, that the 'Smallies' often sided with the Africans against the Jamaicans.<sup>75</sup>

Continuing to outline the specific local geography of the areas affected by these gangs, Edwards concludes that whilst only 'rubble' remained of the old gangland hotspots, 'their legacy lived on amongst the sons of those first immigrants' (253). However, today's youth are distinguished from their parents by being more 'ruthless' and wanting more, 'much more' (253). What is so interesting about the above description is that it situates the contemporary gangland scene in a very locally specific and historical way in terms that relate to other subcultures without comment on any mainstream or normative culture that the gangs might be responding to.

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<sup>75</sup> Karline Smith, *Moss Side Massive* (London: The X Press, 1994), p. 252. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

Lynne Pearce discusses Karline Smith's novels under the generic conventions of crime fiction in the co-authored work *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora, Space and the Devolution of Literary Culture* (forthcoming). For Pearce, the novels participate in the Manchester crime genre, in which writers show a keen awareness of the way that 'historical and institutional forces have materially shaped city-space and frequently highlight the link between present crime and the social and cultural violence done to the region in the past.'<sup>76</sup> Pearce is careful both to distinguish and to illustrate the interdependence between social realism (as a literary mode) and social reality, stating that Smith's characters occupy a space that is at once 'historical and hyperbolic, material and aesthetic.'<sup>77</sup> The novels lend themselves to the generic conventions of crime fiction, and as Lee Horsley argues of the genre, '[t]he investigative structure provides a ready-made instrument for unearthing the previously invisible crimes against a people.'<sup>78</sup> However, reading with this set of genre-tools risks obscuring relationships between subcultural groups and between participants in each subculture. I thus want to examine characters in the novels in terms of style and performative identity, rather than criminality and deviance.

The gang scene described in Smith's novels is one of conspicuous consumption in which luxury items are an index of power and status. Brand names ('Moschino, Armani, Klein, Versace, Rockport, Nike' (FC 249)) litter the text and work as signifiers of wealth and power for their owners. This pursuit of luxury and excess as stylistic markers of subculture might be dismissed of as a simple case of greed, but the

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<sup>76</sup> Lynne Pearce, 'Manchester's Crime Fiction: The Mystery of the City's Smoking Gun', in *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora Space and the Devolution of Literary Culture*, by Lynne Pearce, Corinne Fowler and Robert Crawshaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) [forthcoming], n.pag.

<sup>77</sup> Pearce, 'Manchester's Crime Fiction', n.pag.

<sup>78</sup> Horsley, p. 202.

social backdrop of the novels is one in which the characters are taught to prize monetary wealth, yet are excluded from the means of attaining such wealth legally. The case of three brothers in the novels is illustrative of this plight, as there seems to be no middle ground between poverty and wealth attained through gang affiliation and drug peddling. The eldest brother, Storm, gets involved in ‘a little hustling,’ which escalates uncontrollably, for the simple reason that ‘[b]eing broke was embarrassing’ (*MSM* 218). Blue, described as a ‘smart kid [who] had done well at school’ is nevertheless ‘bombarded with reminders of the materialistic world that didn’t form part of his existence’ and also begins to sell drugs as a child in order to attain the only marker of status that is meaningful amongst his peers (*MSM* 9-10). Zukie is the only one of the brothers that refuses to get involved with the gang scene, identifying instead with the spirituality and music of Rastafarianism, but he is faced with the serious problem of unemployment in the area, especially amongst blacks. Arriving at the Job Centre, Zukie finds that the only job that does not require previous experience – a job as a handyman paying a mere £120 per week – has already been filled, two hundred applications having been received. Zukie does remain outside of the gang circles until he is reluctantly drawn in through association with his brother, but his story illustrates that there is very little (legal) opportunity to ‘mek it in this white man’s world’ (*MSM* 38). For Horsley, ‘Yardie [west Indian] fiction [...] implicitly demands a re-assessment of the postcolonial economic and cultural circumstances that made the Yardie underworld possible [...]. Yardie fiction exposes the economic *need* that underlines the apparent *greed* of the gangland members.’<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Horsley, p. 230.

This paints a very different picture to the image of cosmopolitan London evoked in novels like *The Buddha of Suburbia* in which ethnic products are consumed to lend a touch of the exotic. It makes the need for a devolved approach to literary studies as advocated by critics including Proctor, Pearce and Fowler increasingly apparent, as the representation of black identities, aesthetics, experiences and social mobility from novels written just four years apart is so markedly divergent.<sup>80</sup> To privilege certain experiences of blackness through selective publication (normally those that are cosmopolitan, London-centric and paint a happy picture of multicultural Britain) serves implicitly to create a homogenous norm and repeat acts of exclusion already committed in the socio-economic arena.

The subtitle of this section brings together subcultural performance and parody, two elements that I use in order to conceptualise the way that the gangs are structured in the novels. Gangs function in a way that explicitly mimics legitimate businesses and companies. The following scene shows Miss Small allocating positions in her crew:

Michigan and Ranger are still in Sales and Debt Recovery. Hatchet and Slide are Security. Trench, I want you to be the crew's main Security Consultant and Easy I want you to be Co-Director with myself as Company Director until I decide to evaluate certain positions in the near future. (*FC* 98)

The formal terminology and strict hierarchy that the gang adheres to parallels companies on the right side of the law and in doing so forces a comparison with these companies. Each member of the crew is effective at their allocated role, displaying skills that would be enviable in a different setting. In a similar instance, Storm's

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<sup>80</sup> For more on the devolution of literary studies see Proctor, *Dwelling Places*; Corinne Fowler; Lynne Pearce, Corinne Fowler and Robert Crawshaw, *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora Space and the Devolution of Literary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) [forthcoming].

mother is proud of her son's success as a salesman, oblivious to the fact that his products are drugs. Discussing common conceptions of subcultures, Gelder states that 'their relation to labour might be understood as parasitical, or as a kind of alternative "mirror-image" to legitimate work practices (so that one might even speak, in a certain sense, of a subcultural "career").'<sup>81</sup> Yet the fact that the labour practices might be considered as the illegal reverse of 'legitimate work practices' raises the question of why the subcultures have, as such, been forced underground: the tension between social alienation and the self-imposed choice to remove from society is manifest in this social bias.

Gangland members in Smith's novels also identify by way of musical preference, which is not only distinguished against 'mainstream' musical consumption, but also against Rastas: 'Vegas wasn't a reggae super star whose lyrics ostracized gangs or violence. His lyrics were born strictly out of the dog-eat-dog world, ghetto-heart streets of Kingston Jamaica. To poor afflicted you't he was a super-cult hero' (*FC* 169). Once again protest and dissent (political or otherwise) are embraced as a more suitable (musical) response to the social situation. Gelder defines gansta rap music as occupying a "'post-protest" position' that nevertheless helps to demonstrate that 'racial discrimination remains a fact of [...] daily life.'<sup>82</sup> Unlike the novels considered in the first half of this chapter, in which minority identities are performed for the eager (if patronising) consumption of a white audience, the consumption of dissenting music that documents a history of racism paints postcolonial Britain in a rather different light. For characters in Smith's novels, being black – associated in the novels with hyper-masculinity and deviance – is a badge of honour and a source of subcultural

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<sup>81</sup> Gelder, *Subcultures*, p. 3.

<sup>82</sup> Gelder, *Subcultures*, p. 119.

capital, with each character introduced along with a reference to the precise shade of their skin colour. To be black and not to conform to this subcultural type (privileging hyper-masculinity, street credibility and West Indian inflected argot) is to be held as a traitor, as implied when the novels' black detective is told to pronounce something 'like a true-born nigga instead of some wanna be middle-class white man' (*FC* 236).

Moving from consumerism to sex, it is apparent that sexual desire is traced in a decidedly different manner in Karline Smith's novels than in novels examined in the first half of the chapter. If national romance is a genre concerned with the doubling of desire at personal and political levels, Smith's novels might be read as a critique of the desire for power (in all aspects of life) that expresses itself in the domination of women.<sup>83</sup> Women occupy peripheral roles in the novels, excluded from the homosocial bonds that unite the gang members; they are frequently referred to as 'bitches' and 'hos' and a man's ability to 'manners his woman' stands as a marker of pride (*MSM* 267). Easy-Love Brown is the series' worst manipulator of women, seducing two women simultaneously but to different ends. The quotation that stands as the subtitle for this section is taken from Easy's seduction of Vaniesha (the notorious Miss Small), whose gang he subsequently plans to usurp. His promise to make her 'heart and [...] profits rise' shamelessly conflates sexual and materialistic desire in a way that cheapens any illusion of romance that might otherwise have been pretended, cheesy lines aside (68). Sex, for Easy, is just another means of manipulation or asserting his authority. His other girlfriend – an Irish woman with IRA links that goes by the name of Chris – is equally seduced by Easy's money and succumbs to sleep with him in a bed covered in paper bills. The crass and ludicrous

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<sup>83</sup> Sommer, p. 38.

equation of sexual and material desire (another classic line includes Easy's request that Chris join him to 'make a baby in our money bed' (*FC* 116)) is an example of conflating two spheres of life that are not readily compatible.

*Moss Side Massive* and *Full Crew* might initially seem like straightforward subcultural novels, written and marketed for subcultural consumption. However, even if this is the case, the novels internally critique the subculture, largely through their casts of female characters, who represent the world of filiative relationships that the men sacrifice for their affiliative subcultural ones. The first few sections of *Moss Side Massive* are focalised through members of the Piper Mill Posse following their leader's assassination, meaning that from the opening readers are encouraged to identify with the gang. But the subsequent introduction of female voices (of partners and mothers), of policemen, and of men from the rival gang, serve to challenge this identification and critique the subculture internally. Calling characters by different names according to which group they are operating within at the time (Storm is called Clifton by his family at home) is a means of defamiliarisation that illustrates the characters' multiple and often conflicting responsibilities.

In conclusion, Smith paints an alternative view of postcolonial Britain by locating her characters amidst the poverty and social alienation of Moss Side, Manchester. By taking as her muse a subculture that values conspicuous consumption and hyper-masculine assertions of power, Smith is able to provoke a consideration of the social situation that has provided fertile breeding ground for gang culture. Though she depicts her characters as products of circumstance Smith does not entirely excuse them. The novels' dialogism and multiple points of focalisation function to offer

explanations for the subculture's stance, whilst also internally critiquing it through the string of broken families that the men leave in their wake.

### **Failing the Authenticity Test: Subculture and Performativity in Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani***

Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* similarly rotates around a group of young men, but this time they self-identify as 'desis', using a modernisation of the Sanskrit word for 'countryman' to mean 'homeboy' and to identify a group that has previously been labelled 'rudeboys, [...] Indian niggas, then rajamuffins, then raggastanis, Britasians, fuckin Indobrits.'<sup>84</sup> Jas is a 19-year-old from Hounslow who is retaking his A Levels along with his desi friends. In order to make money and purchase the luxury items worshipped by their subculture, the boys have a business unlocking mobile phones, which – tax evasion aside – is just about above board until they break one of the phones they have been given and are forced to steal a new one. Upon being caught stealing said phone from their teacher they are swiftly set up with Sanjay, their teacher's model ex-student, supposedly to give the boys something to aspire to and work for. However, Sanjay quickly decides to turn the boys into assets for his own illegal business and they begin to make more money by selling on their unlocked (and presumably stolen) mobile phones. Besides the unconventional business mentoring that the boys receive from Sanjay, he secretly mentors Jas in the ways of seduction, in order that he might try his chances with the beautiful, but Muslim, Samira. To date a Muslim girl, Jas realises, is a crime for which his friends would definitely disown and possibly kill him. A downward spiral of events in which Jas loses his friends, his money, his girlfriend and his Dad's company leaves him lying in a hospital bed at the

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<sup>84</sup> Gautam Malkani, *Londonstani* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), p. 6. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

end of the novel. It is only then that readers learn what Jas is short for: not Jaswinder, like his friend, but Jason, or more precisely 'Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden: aged nineteen, white, male' (340).

This section will detail the altar of conspicuous consumption at which the characters worship, before moving onto the unusual marketing of the novel and the authenticity test at which the author claims repeatedly to have failed. I aim to raise questions concerning the imagined audience(s) of postcolonial British novels and about how far readers are prepared to accept the performativity of identity.

Like the gangs of Karline Smith's novels, the desi boys in *Londonstani* style themselves in the most expensive of designer clothing and drive the fastest, newest, flashiest cars; as Sanjay reminds them: '[c]onspicuous consumption, luxury brands, immediate gratification and nice things are much too important to you, that much at least you guys have already decided' (167). Yet this is where the similarity with Smith's gangs ends: the desi boys of *Londonstani* are from middle class backgrounds with two-parent families and a much wider array of choices. Their decision to adopt a 'street' argot and an illegal livelihood is a freely made choice to reject the mainstream, not one that is engendered by a background of poverty or social alienation. The stylistic choices that the boys make to surround themselves in the most luxurious of items are self-consciously articulated as an economic ideology: 'there's no Marxist alternative any more. The fall of communism, the rise of bling' (168). Employing quasi-religious terminology, Sanjay explains to Jas and his friends that '[y]ou will forever be judged and judge yourselves by your luxury consumerist aspirations, your nice stuff' (167-68).

The ideological/religious nature of Sanjay's explanations amasses extra significance if we consider that the boys' parents' culture is defined along religious lines, all (with the exception of Jas) coming from Hindu or Sikh backgrounds. Their parents' generation is shown to discriminate according to ethnicity or religion, with Ravi's Mum telling him 'she'd die if he ever went out with a BMW (by which she meant black, Muslim or white)' (335). The desi boys adopt the prejudices of their parents, but are shown to have little care for religious practices unless they concern the machismo of family honour or can be incorporated into their clothing style: 'Hardjit always wore a Karha round his wrist an something orange to show he was a Sikh' (9) and they all wear rakhis until Diwali to show how many girls they are bound to protect (175). The incorporation of religious symbols into desi clothing illustrates the shared culture with their parents, but with material goods replacing spiritual gods as the key marker of identity, a subcultural turn is evident. In an interview, Malkani states that 'Hardjit might pretend that he's sourcing his identity from his ethnic roots or whatever, but he's not. He's sourcing it from Hollywood, Bollywood, MTV Base and ads for designer fashion brands.'<sup>85</sup> It is this issue of 'pretence' and the loaded language of (in)authenticity that I will consider shortly.

Firstly, it is necessary to clarify that this urban subculture has quite a different relation to the mainstream than many of the subcultures that have previously received critical attention (punks, mods, rockers, hippies and skaters, for example), because it has such a consumerist pull as to tend towards the mainstream itself. In Hebdige's assessment of subcultural style, he suggests that mainstream consumption signals the collapse of a

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<sup>85</sup> James Graham, 'An Interview with Gautam Malkani: Ealing, Broadway, 6 November 2007', *Literary London*, 6.1 (2008) <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2008/graham.html>> [accessed 21 July 2012] (para 3 of 37).

subculture, citing *Cosmopolitan's* embrace of punk style in its pages as 'presag[ing] the subculture's imminent demise.'<sup>86</sup> Yet Sanjay, spokesperson for the ideology of urban youth culture, argues that 'more and more people subscribe' to the subculture (170), but that '[t]his isn't about society becoming more affluent, this is about a subculture that worships affluence becoming mainstream culture' (171). According to Sanjay (and perhaps it is also worth bearing in mind that Gautam Malkani is also a journalist for the *Financial Times*), this should change the way that the economy itself functions, as this subculture 'operate[s] at a much higher level of inflation' (171).

Alongside its luxury-branded stylisation, this urban subculture is also characterised by interplay between ideas of ethnic authenticity and the performance of a subcultural identity. Like the gangsters of Karline Smith's novels, the urban desis identify against 'coconuts,' who are portrayed as complicit with white middle class values. Pulling up alongside an Asian man's car they cruelly observe:

You could tell from his long hair, grungy clothes, the poncey novel an newspaper on his dashboard an Coldplay album playin in his car that he was a muthafuckin coconut. So white he was inside his brown skin, he probably talked like those gorafied desis who read the news on TV. (20-21)<sup>87</sup>

His choice not to live the same lavish lifestyle as the urban desis causes them to write him off as 'some gora-lovin, dirty hippie' (22). Whiteness, or 'gorafication' is frequently used as an insult in the novel. However, the line between whites and

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<sup>86</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 96.

<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, *White Teeth's* Samad is also implicitly compared to a coconut when he offers one as a gift to his white lover, Poppy, describing it as '[b]rown and old on the outside, white and fresh on the inside' (166). The implication (given the term's negative connotations that were already current) is that Samad is a racial traitor for being seduced by Poppy, which goes to reinforce my argument that white women are often called upon to represent far more than they signify in novels of interracial romance.

Asians, goras and desis, is not so clear-cut as readers might initially surmise, as illustrated by Jas's desi pretence/performance throughout the novel.

*Londonstani*'s structure is designed to trick readers into believing that, like his friends, Jas is also from an Indian background and on my first reading of the novel I (probably like many others) was shocked by the final 'reveal' that the narrator is actually white. The 'we' of the novel appears to be drawn along ethnic lines, explicitly so at points. Hardjit, in the process of beating someone up, turns to Amit, Ravi and Jas for confirmation of his threats, '[c]all me or any a ma bredrens a Paki again an I'ma mash u an yo family. In't dat da truth, Pakis?' (3). Their uniform response – '[d]at's right [...] dat be da truth' (3) – serves to align Jas with Amit and Ravi. None of the boys are actually from Pakistani backgrounds, illustrating both the conflation of Indians and Pakistanis in racist abuse and the desire of the boys to appropriate or perform a subordinated status. Jas's refusal to reveal his surname is put down to it being 'one a them extra long surnames that nobody'd ever pronounce proply,' citing a problem more typically associated with South Asian names (24). Even his girlfriend, Samira, describes him as 'just another straight-off-the-boat possessive desi guy,' equating his (increasingly misogynist) attitude with those of a first generation migrant (294). Malkani disperses red herrings like this throughout the novel in order to fuel assumptions that Jas shares his friends' Indian 'roots' (a word that I use here in the loosest of senses).

Initially marketed for consumers of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, *Londonstani* quickly fell under the critical radar when it became apparent that the novel was not courting favour with the traditional market for multicultural

fiction. In an article questioning if the British novel has lost its way, Robert McCrum cites the book's mismarketing as the reason for its lack of commercial success, arguing that 'if it had been published, as its author once intended, as a teen novel, it might have found a secure place as a contemporary classroom classic.'<sup>88</sup> However, following a £300,000 cash advance from Fourth Estate, 'the die was cast' and '[l]ike a Fiat Uno entered for Formula 1, after a squeal of brakes and a loud bang, *Londonstani* was reduced to a stain of grease, and some scraps of rubber and tin, on the race track of the 2006 spring publishing season.'<sup>89</sup> An examination of the various covers in which the novel has been packaged give an idea of the way that the projected market has evolved. The hardcover versions offer a choice of a pink tiger, illustrated in a way that would fit perfectly on a Rushdie novel, or of a tube sign, reinforcing its status as a London text; the paperback options add two further covers, one showing a hooded boy on a backdrop of grey paving slabs with a union jack flag in the corner, painting a rather more dismal image of Britishness, and the other capturing an image of a desi rudeboy on a backdrop of yellow with garish pink font and a London skyline shadowing the title. It is the latter cover – most conspicuously marketed for an urban teen audience – that has been selected for subsequent paperback reprints and the Kindle edition of the novel. But the novel has literary merit and its apparent status as a piece of teen fiction should not exclude it from critical attention, as is implied by McCrum's rather patronising assessment. It provides an alternative perspective on urban culture in multicultural Britain and raises important questions about identity and authenticity.

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<sup>88</sup> Robert McCrum, 'Has the novel lost its way?', *The Observer*, 28 May 2006 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/may/28/fiction.features>> [accessed 23 July 2012] (para. 26 of 29).

<sup>89</sup> McCrum (para. 27 of 29).

In an article on the market for London's multicultural fictions, James Graham puts the unfavourable early reception of the novel down to the fact that unlike the earlier 'multicultural fictions' it refused to make 'knowable' the communities that it represented in a convincing manner.<sup>90</sup> 'This is because', Graham argues, '*Londonstani* self-consciously mimics the way subculture is *performed*, rather than representing the way religious, racial or ethnically defined communities live.'<sup>91</sup> However, the novel's playful performativity of identity is a common feature of novels representing multicultural Britain, rather than mapping out a new direction in the oeuvre. As I illustrated previously, *The Buddha of Suburbia* abounds with themes of performativity and staging precisely in order to show the 'lie' of authenticity. Creating a binary, as Graham does, between performing and being resurrects the very barrier that Malkani's fiction works to dismantle.

Graham's dubious reading of earlier multicultural fiction aside, *Londonstani* grapples interestingly with authenticity in a way that has not been palatable to some audiences. My conviction is that it is the imagined or intended audience that differs for this work, rather than the process of bringing performance to the forefront. Returning to Huggan, we might recall that he describes the identity performance as witnessed in novels such as *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Satanic Verses* as 'staged marginality,' which is the 'process by which marginalised individuals or social groups are moved to dramatise their "subordinate" status for the benefit of a majority or mainstream audience.'<sup>92</sup> The difference with Malkani's novel, I would therefore

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<sup>90</sup> James Graham, "'this in't Good Will Hunting": *Londonstani* and the market for London's multicultural fictions', *Literary London*, 6.2 (2008) <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2008/graham.html>> [accessed 22 May 2012] (para. 13 of 23).

<sup>91</sup> Graham, 'this in't Good Will Hunting', para. 18 of 23.

<sup>92</sup> Huggan, p. 87.

argue, is that although it similarly revels in performative identities and a (sub)culture defined by what it consumes, the imagined audience implied by the text (if not by the original paratext) consists of subcultural insiders, *not* the ‘majority’ audience suggested by the texts that Huggan examines.

I coin the term ‘imagined audience’ as a critical framework for considering to whom the novels appear to be talking. Taking *The Buddha of Suburbia* as a case in point, Kureishi’s novel appears to be addressing a white, mainstream audience; if it were not, his critique of white middle class ‘exotic’ consumerism would be pointless and it would be unnecessary repeatedly to represent the diegetic audiences as predominantly white. By contrast, *Londonstani* is a text that seems to speak to itself. Our narrator, Jas, slips between first and second person narration and in doing so generalises his own situation, assumes the audience’s similar experiences and creates a conversational relationship. Slipping out of the first person ‘I’, the narrator begins to extrapolate: ‘[i]n the end you ignored everyone. The whole fuckin lot. The problem for you was that the situation with Samira was different’ (145). Sometimes Jas talks to himself explicitly in moments of self-loathing, where different factions of his personality go to war leaving him stammering and helpless in front of his friends. The only audience that Jas cares about is his friends, who – despite Jas’s devotion to ‘MTV Base an Juggy D videos’ – seem to possess a superior level of ‘rudeboy authenticity’ (6).

However, authenticity is not something that Jas is alone in lacking. By hosting a number of the scenes in various parents’ houses, Malkani is able to illustrate that the boys are all different at home to on the streets or with friends, exchanging their ‘desi

rudeboy' postures for polite and respectful exchanges with parents and aunts. Malkani is justifiably annoyed at the 'authenticity hurdle that reviewers have required [him] to jump,' which 'implies that there's a single authentic British Asian experience and that authentic experience can't be shared by someone who went to Cambridge and works for the FT.' He states that '[t]he whole point of the book was to look at the construction and performance of inauthentic identities among young people today regardless of race.'<sup>93</sup> The presence of the novel's deliberate red herring (in the form of the white narrator) in part contradicts Malkani's own assertions, as race is deliberately foregrounded as an important feature in the performance of identity by being hidden until the end and therefore provoking a retrospective reading of the novel. However, Jas provides the key for understanding the inherently performative nature of all of the characters that populate the novel.

Although I have argued that the novel speaks to itself, this is not to say that it fails to exercise any criticism. It is ultimately the boys' greed and desire for luxury that proves to be their fatal flaw, leading to their involvement in Sanjay's scam, a scam that results in Jas being attacked by three unidentified thugs as he attempts to set fire to his father's business in order to cover up the robbery that he has just committed. Malkani also highlights the misogyny present in the desis' treatment of women. Though Jas starts promisingly – defending Samira's honour as his friends accuse her of sluttishness – he assumes an increasingly misogynist perspective as the novel progresses. Following Sanjay's formula for 'Cross-Cultural Chirpsin' (or chatting up a Muslim girl) to the letter, Jas demonstrates an increasing tendency to treat Samira

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<sup>93</sup> Graham, 'Interview', para. 7 of 37, para. 10 of 37.

like an object to be controlled and possessed, to the extent that he begins utter the same crass misogyny that he had earlier berated his friends for.

It follows that though *Londonstani* talks to itself – and by that I mean to subcultural insiders, not to an imagined white and/or mainstream audience – it is nevertheless self-critical. Malkani's novel both celebrates a subcultural world in which all identities are performative *and* critiques problems of misogyny and greed that have been levelled at desi rudeboys. I believe that it has not, to date, received the critical attention that it deserves, because it has been crucially misunderstood in relation to its multicultural predecessors and presents a vision of multicultural Britain that has a problematic relationship with money and hyper-masculinity, making it unpalatable to the market at which it was initially directed.

**'I'm just a fucking tourist . . . I just look at the view': Post-subcultural identity and the Order of Money in Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal's *Tourism***

The final novel I turn to in this chapter could be considered post-subcultural: whilst subculture has been called 'a response to the individualisation and alienation of modern life,' post-subcultural commentary holds that 'individualisation is modern life's logical and desirable conclusion.'<sup>94</sup> Bhupinder ('Puppy') Singh Johal, the narrator of Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal's *Tourism*, is a perennial outsider. Barely recognising social ties or responsibilities he adopts the detached gaze of the perpetual tourist, which is at once removed from 'mainstream' values and from relations to work and consumerism, yet also fails to acknowledge subcultural ties with other outsiders. Puppy has left his Southall childhood home to mix with London's

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<sup>94</sup> Gelder, *Subcultures*, p. 105.

multicultural elite and shamelessly seduces rich-girl Sophie in order to live off her wealth and get closer to Sarupa, fiancée of Sophie's cousin. The narrative takes us through a host of graphically-detailed sexual encounters, climaxing at Puppy's eventual seduction of Sarupa. Yet this does not signal a romantic resolution to the novel, as Sarupa (though pregnant with Puppy's child) goes back to her fiancé and leaves Puppy to indulge in a downward spiral of unhealthy eating, smoking marijuana and watching daytime television. Puppy finally gets his break by stealing £20,000 from his only close friend and escaping to Europe in order to shed any remaining ties and indulge his touristic predilection more seriously.

I have chosen to incorporate a discussion of this novel because sex and capitalism drive the novel's ideology (or collapse of ideology) in a way that provides interesting contrasts with the literature that has gone before. Similar to the novels that I described as 'national romances' discussed in the first half of the chapter, *Tourism* represents a number of interracial relationships; however, these relationships are viewed from a cynical distance as comical stereotypes of desire, resounding with political incorrectness and louche irreverence. The novel is littered with sound bites on the narrator's opinion of the 'miscegenist heaven' that is London: 'white women clung to well-wrought ethnic studs who pushed tricycle pushchairs laden with fat brown babies; demure young white men guided Asian girlfriends through stalls selling hookahs, avant-garde sneakers and sun-dried tomatoes'; 'in his grab for wealth, Whitey created the body his women want to fuck the most'; '[w]hite chicks love dark cock [...]. Even Princess Diana was crazy for it,' and so on.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal, *Tourism* (London: Vintage, 2006), pp. 52, 62, 160. All further references shall be given parenthetically in the text.

Yet a novel so immersed in sex in all of its lurid detail is profoundly unerotic, as Puppy describes the various sexual acts in clinical detail and in doing so removes any illusion of emotional attachment or desire. Recounting his experience with a prostitute (Luca), Puppy recalls '[s]he closed her eyes and slid a firm grip up and down my erection, winding her hips while I fingered her' (15). This scene – reminiscent of a Mills and Boon by virtue of its explicit erotic language – is deflated by the remarkably anti-climactic addendum: '[t]his continued for some time' (15). His longer-term relationships hardly fare better, as a series of bathetic plunges deny sexual climax. Descriptions of sex are brief and mechanical, ending with distraction or disinterest:

My prick stiffened. I held her buttocks; I gripped one and she moaned, moving her head back and forth, sucking my tongue. I fingered her arsehole; she liked it and pushed her hips back, easing it in further. I dug my finger in deep, pulled her close and sucked her mouth hard. I thought about fucking her again, but saw no reason to spoil her. I drew my face away and nodded to the bowls of coffee, the two slices of toast lying on the work top. 'I've made breakfast.' (49)

Scenes such as the above serve to highlight the emotional detachment of the narrator, placing him as a voyeur rather than an agent in the world that he inhabits.

Puppy's emotional detachment confirms his overriding anti-ideology. As the subtitle states, Puppy considers himself a 'tourist,' an answer that he gives in response to Sarupa's bemused questioning: '[s]o you're not a socialist, or an anarchist or anti-globalist, even though you think capitalism is mediocre and paranoid?' (85). His sense of alienation is not only self-imposed, however, as he argues that he would

‘have to feel [...] relevant to the world in order to care about it’ (85). Puppy understands that money is the only thing that counts in the social milieu that he wants to inhabit, and this is something that he does not have.

Sarupa is the only woman with whom Puppy is emotionally involved, but she moves in social circles that Puppy cannot properly enter. Her dismissal of him in favour of her rich but uninteresting fiancé serves to highlight the novel’s ideology: it is not romance that has the power to unite different social factions, but money. As Puppy observes, ‘[m]oney alchemises people, the mere suspicion of it changes *everything*’ (52). For people like himself and his black friend Michael, who are both financially excluded from London’s elite circles, the only hope is ‘[k]nowing what white people want’ and selling it to them, which is Michael’s philosophy for ‘making it’ in Britain (159). The only way that they can subvert the hierarchy is to ridicule consumers with the products that they ‘sell.’ Growing tired of an undistinguished career in journalism, Michael decides to produce some artwork, for which he receives lottery funding. His concept is a ‘multi-screen video installation: called *Niggers*, it involved images of everyday white people – plumbers, bank clerks, taxi drivers – dancing the running-man to Vanilla Ice’s 1990 hit single “Ice Ice Baby”’ (159). When questioned on the rationale behind the piece, he answers ‘I wrote about how this idea deals with the white paradigm, and its appropriation of the black subject. [...] Fuck knows [what it means]. Evie told me to write it. But they fell for it. Can you fucking believe that?’ (159). Selling crazy products to a hungry, white, consuming public is a way of ridiculing a society built on the hierarchy of who has the capacity to consume the most.

Romance fails as an alchemist for disparate social factions in *Tourism*; however, Puppy uses sex as another way of reversing the ruthless capitalist hierarchy by placing himself as the consumer of white bodies. Described as so much meat on a shelf in acts of disinterested appraisal, white women are frequently subjected to Puppy's cruel gaze: '[t]he blonde [...] was sexy, but wasn't the prettiest girl around; her face was wide, her teeth a little crooked. I didn't mind; I wouldn't have to put in too much work' (221). This reverses a hierarchy that Felly Nkweto Simmonds identifies in her article 'Love in Black and White,' where she argues that in 'sexual relationship[s] between Black and white [...] the white body is ascribed the status of consumer ... of Black bodies,' citing historical and contemporary examples in support of this.<sup>96</sup> This article was published nearly two decades ago, and I would hope that were it written again today the prospects for interracial relationships would not look so bleak. However, the article has contemporary relevance in terms of its emphasis on the interconnected history of sexual and racial politics, which necessitates the inclusion of the 'public/political' as well as the 'private/personal' in the theorisation of 'interracial romances.'<sup>97</sup> Rather than simple and generic misogyny, Puppy's denigration of women is limited to those that are white, creating an alternate hierarchy in which capital is not supreme and in which those without it do not have to pander to the consumerist desires of the white majority.

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<sup>96</sup> Felly Nkweto Simmonds, 'Love in Black and White', in *Romance Revisited*, ed. by Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 210-22 (p. 217).

<sup>97</sup> Simmonds, pp. 220-21. More recently Anne-Marie Fortier employs the trope of 'propinquity' to describe inter-ethnic relations in order to reflect the way in which 'popular and policy discourses position inter-ethnic relationships between Muslim Asians and white English people [...] with an implied assumption of non-erotic intimacy.' This suggests that despite the realities of interethnic sexual relationships, public discourse is still located in the platonic realm of neighbourliness and proximity. Fortier, p. 69.

This paints a rather bleak picture of contemporary postcolonial Britain, but in doing so reveals and challenges the capitalist logic and blinkered devotion to the economy that is increasingly defining British national politics. Gelder's analysis of the post-subcultural trend illustrates that it is the perfect model for Dhaliwal's social critique: '[a]ll that this post-subcultural picture of heterogeneity is left with here is a benign and docile expression of capitalism's primary ideological fantasy, the "individual's freedom of choice."' <sup>98</sup> Puppy stands as an outworking and (due to his cruel character traits) implicit critique of capitalist logic. Denied the freedom of choice granted by financial wealth, the narrator instead exercises his freedom of choice on the sexual market, expressly grateful that he 'didn't have to strive for wealth to avoid a life of substandard sexual partners' (139). In doing so he replaces a financial hierarchy with a sexual one and becomes a representative of the ruthless detachment of market forces.

This chapter has shown how various postcolonial British novelists have approached the relationship between consumerist and sexual desires and contemporary Britain. Each of the novels that I have considered, from Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* to Dhaliwal's *Tourism*, have used consumerist and erotic drives in order to comment upon and critique the construction of the British body politic. Throughout the chapter I have borne in mind the market forces behind the novels that we (as a reading public) are offered as instances of postcolonial British literature and have attempted to be sensitive towards those novels that do not present a picture of Britain that the biggest (and most affluent) publishers are willing to endorse. This engendered the distinction that I have made between the mainstream high-profile authors discussed in the first

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<sup>98</sup> Gelder, *Subcultures*, p. 106.

half of the chapter and the less well-known authors discussed in the latter half that tend towards subcultural representations of society. The novels that I have selected, spanning two decades, illustrate a changing cultural and literary landscape with a shifting relationship between minority and mainstream, producer and consumer. This has come about through a change in what I have termed the imagined audiences of postcolonial British fiction from white majority to subcultural minority as books are increasingly marketed to subcultural insiders. A shift in literary criticism of recent years to account for those novelists that have not achieved the literary stardom of the likes of Rushdie and Kureishi also serves to expose the marketing prejudices (desiring images of happy multiculturalism) that inform publishing choices. It warns against academics repeating these acts of exclusion, meaning that novels confronting gang culture and hyper-masculinity (amongst other things) can achieve the critical attention that they deserve. Each novel that I have considered offers a challenge of its own as to the way that postcolonial Britain might be imagined, but shared concerns of performativity and audience, sex and sexism, fetishisation (of the Other, or of the Self), mainstream and minority (or subculture) unite these novels as workings out of the sexual and consumerist desires that lay behind interpersonal and intercultural relationships in contemporary Britain.

## Conclusion

In September 2012, Random House published Salman Rushdie's memoir, *Joseph Anton*. It appears that the purpose of the memoir is to figure the 'Rushdie Affair' as an early precursor of 9/11, framing Rushdie's own story as 'a sort of prologue' to the main event: 'a pair of planes flying into tall buildings.'<sup>1</sup> Written in the third person, to reflect the retreat into fiction that Rushdie had to make when he was forced to adopt and live under a pseudonym (the eponymous Joseph Anton) during the course of the 'Affair,' the memoir provides a gossipy insight into Rushdie's romantic liaisons and public relations. Rushdie's self-portrait as the first victim of 9/11 refracts his previous casting as the villain of the 'Affair' and allows him to make farcically insincere defences of *The Satanic Verses*: 'the material derived from the origin story of Islam was, he thought, essentially admiring of the Prophet of Islam and even respectful of him.'<sup>2</sup> A page later he continues, '[a]nyway, his prophet was not called Muhammed, lived in a city not called Mecca and created a religion not (or not quite) called Islam.'<sup>3</sup> It stretches credulity. However, the publication of this memoir serves as a timely reminder that *The Satanic Verses* engages with topics that still have relevance today, as Rushdie draws parallels between a battle of ideologies that he depicts as similarly defining the Affair, 9/11 and the recent Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> I would not want to conflate the agendas of the Bradford rioters with the 9/11 terrorists in the same way that Rushdie tends towards, but it is apparent that

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, p. 4. The parallel Rushdie makes here is by no means new or unique, indeed Kenan Malik's *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and Its Legacy* is constructed around exactly this scripting of history. See Kenan Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and Its Legacy* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, p. 625.

debates that surrounded the Affair still have a part to play in global politics. This justifies my choice to return to the novel in order to answer questions about what I term ‘contemporary’ constructions of Britishness.

This thesis has argued that the disciplines of genre studies and postcolonial criticism can be usefully brought to bear upon one other in order to interrogate constructions of Britishness in contemporary fiction. By pursuing this dictum it becomes apparent that the unstable boundaries of genre can provide fertile ground for authors that have traditionally been marginalised by virtue of their minority status, so as to make internal contradictions apparent and to begin to negotiate both national and generic boundaries. I have shown ways in which genres have been reinvigorated and redefined by postcolonial British authors and I have drawn attention to questions that an engagement with genre raises for postcolonial theory.

Chapter One, devoted to the Bildungsroman, traced the evolution of the genre from Rushdie’s embrace of ‘hybridity, impurity, intermingling’ in *The Satanic Verses* towards a rejection of hybrid identities and an increasing nostalgia for the absence of authority and meaning.<sup>5</sup> The re-centring of religious (as opposed to national, racial or ethnic) identities in recent British Bildungsromane serves as a challenge to postcolonial theorists to question the ‘secular, Euro-American stance that *seems* to shape the parameters of postcolonial discourses.’<sup>6</sup> It illustrates that postcolonial writing in contemporary Britain entails a concern for decentring ideas of nationhood as the only – or the primary – source of identification.

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<sup>5</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p.394.

<sup>6</sup> Malak, p. 17.

Chapter Two turned to the Gothic as a site for exploring structures of fear that play a part in defining contemporary Britain. Born of a genre that has historically had a close affiliation with constructions of English national identity, contemporary postcolonial Gothic challenges its imperial forebears in terms of the production of alterity and monstrosity, and also takes on fears and traumas that rack the contemporary world. Contemporary Gothic, which increasingly expresses a ‘desire *for* trauma,’ calls into question the desire to identify as a victim and to construct a collective identity out of shared experiences of trauma.<sup>7</sup> This illustrates new – yet problematic – ways of constructing postcolonial Britain.

In Chapter Three I focused on comedy in recent films, tracking the evolution of the genre through two distinct phases. The first of these phases is defined by a desire to represent a happy multicultural society with inclusive laughter as its aim, whilst the second is defined by the use of comedy as an alternative response to media constructions of fear. This chapter brings to light the question of who is excluded in utopian visions of multicultural Britain and highlights media constructions of fear that form the backdrop to the latter generation of comedy.

My final chapter discussed the related genres of national romance and subcultural urban fiction, genres that share a predilection for the representation of consumerist and erotic desires. The genres have evolved through their opening out to discourses of mainstream and marginality and the consumerist desire for ‘exotic’ products and lovers. This chapter raises important questions regarding the responsibility of (postcolonial) academics not to repeat acts of exclusion already performed in

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<sup>7</sup> Warwick, p.11.

corporate publishing preferences. My foregrounding of economic factors seeks to ensure that we do not restrict desire to a purely libidinal realm, but situate it in relation to the marketplace.

I have contained my thesis to the discussion of five genres, but there are obvious areas in which it could be expanded. Even were I to restrict myself to genres in which *The Satanic Verses* participates, there would be cases for considering the sci-fi and the noir thriller. Each time genres expand to include postcolonial topics the boundaries of genre are redrawn and postcolonial theory must adapt to address questions raised by the genres. Focussing on the postcolonial sci-fi, for example, might lead to questions over the representation of aliens, the politics of fantasy or the kinds of social critique enabled through the portrayal of dystopian worlds. If we took the postcolonial noir thriller as our topic, we might foreground constructions of criminality, morality, deviance, exclusion, social injustice, and so on. So there is no tidy way of concluding the story of postcolonial British genre fiction, as the parameters constantly shift and change in order to encompass new ways of desiring, new objects of fear and new fashions in the production and consumption of literature.

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