

# ANSHUMAN MONDAL

## Introduction: Resisting the Rhetoric of Normalisation

It is difficult now to look back beyond the prismatic events of September 11 last year to the summer of discontent in Britain's northern cities. Such has been the impact of the terrible events in New York on the collective public consciousness of Europe and America that it may well come to be a historically definitive moment in the history of the world, although, as Chou-En-Lai said of the French Revolution, it is still too early to tell. Nevertheless, it has already had a significant impact on the *interpretation* of global relations and of the place of "others" *in* the "west." So much so, in fact, that the new narrative of global relations that has emerged post-September 11—with its talk of clashing civilisations, its "you're either with us or against us" melodrama—has retrospectively subsumed earlier events such as the racial disturbances in Oldham and Bradford into its interpretative framework—a convergence that has gone largely unnoticed.

Prior to September 11, one could detect in the reporting of events in Oldham and Bradford a certain tension between discussing the "problem" in terms of the tired liberal pluralist vocabulary of "race relations" and "integration" on the one hand, and, on the other, the *material* faultlines in an economically underperforming and socially

fractured corner of Britain. Racial and cultural difference was a potent discourse through which material factors such as poverty, lack of education, limited opportunity and unemployment could be interpreted and conclusions drawn. It is clear there was a perceived bias in the allocation of resources—housing, social services, infrastructural investment—towards the Asian communities on the part of the “white” communities in some highly depressed areas of Oldham; it is also equally clear that a new generation of Asian youth feel disenfranchised and alienated from society for precisely the same reasons in reverse. For both groups, race became a signifier by which to articulate such material grievances.

This tension between discussing the disturbances in terms of culture and community, on the one hand, and in terms of material disadvantage, on the other, still exists but, after September 11, shifted decisively towards the former—at least in public political discourse. The debate now fell not within the context of poverty and lack of opportunity, but rather identity. Already heavily Islamophobic, the public discourse in Britain since September has focussed in the main on questions relating exclusively to culture, identity and “belonging” (read: allegiance, or loyalty). Here the narrative of the “clash of civilisations” can be felt on such questions as: can Britain’s ethnic minorities ever be integrated fully? Will they ever “belong” here? How can the secular “west” accommodate communities that do not believe in secularism? Where do their loyalties lie—with their state or their religion? Underlying all of these is not only the register of civilisational conflict but also notions of identity. The media frenzy over British citizens who were fighting for the Taliban brought to a head these underlying doubts about the allegiances of Britain’s ethnic minorities. Nourished by years of paranoid racist rhetoric about “swamping” and being made to feel “strangers in our own land,” the persistent doubts about “multiculturalism” throughout the post-

immigration decades of the twentieth century rose to the surface in this vitriol over a handful of disaffected Muslim youths who somehow proved that “they” could never be like “us.”

More alarmingly, the Home Secretary’s recent proposals concerning citizenship and language tests and an oath of allegiance for new immigrants to Britain, and the government’s continued demonisation of “asylum seekers” (which seems to have become a euphemism for immigration in general), falls squarely into line with the kind of reasoning that seeks to unthread decades, if not centuries, of cultural interweaving. David Blunkett has suggested that new immigrants should become familiar with British “norms” and “values.”<sup>1</sup> This has the rather pernicious implication that the cultures which such immigrants bring with them must confront an already established “norm” of Britishness within which their cultures have no place. In this discourse, their “difference” can merely be tolerated. It is a slippage back into the old argument about “assimilation.” Moreover, it sits somewhat uncomfortably with the government’s official ideology of “multiculturalism”—though it does illuminate what kind of “multiculturalism” the government and the (largely white) liberal establishment are talking about.

“Multiculturalism” has become the dominant signifier in public discourse for a culturally diverse society. It is, however, highly problematic and is in practice indistinguishable from liberal pluralism. Indeed, pluralism and “multiculturalism” are often used interchangeably by ministers and the media. Underlying the term, however, are a cluster of terms such as “tolerance,” “majority” and “minority” all of which preserve a rigid principle of difference between a “British” (or English) culture and its “others.” Different cultures occupy, as it were, the same physical space but *not* the same cultural space. Chicken tikka masala may indeed be the most popular dish

for British palates but in this discourse “traditional” Britain can still be signified by cream-tea or roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. At stake here is what the “tradition” of a multicultural society is—what is, and is not, a part of the story of “Britain.” As Mike Wayne and Peter Childs point out in their respective essays, a certain view of Britain is still seen as paradigmatic—a view in which the bowler hat and the Edwardian long dress (or even the miniskirt) are quintessentially “British,” but not the sari, shalwar-kameez or the Nehru jacket, which are quickly dispatched to “other” traditions. However these forms of dress—especially as worn by Asian youths who have known no other home than “this blessed plot” —and cuisine (balti is from Birmingham not Bombay), and other forms cultural practice—from communities who have migrated from all corners of the globe—*are* integral to the story of Britain.

The rhetoric of normalisation articulated by David Blunkett may, it turns out, be perfectly compatible with a liberal pluralist sense of “multiculturalism” that tolerates “difference” but does not accept it as part of the “self.” It is, however, incompatible with the reality of Britain today, which has undergone a process of what Stuart Hall calls “diasporisation” and which has become, in Avtar Brah’s words, a “diasporic space.”<sup>2</sup> New ways of thinking about cultural difference, new ideas and concepts and a new critical discourse have begun to emerge in the work of Hall, Brah, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy and others, but this has not yet disseminated into the public discourse at large.

The essays assembled here discuss, in their various and complex ways, the reality of cultural diversity in Britain today and are an attempt to contribute to the mapping of new ways of thinking about the “story of Britain.” Originally presented at a conference entitled “British Braids: Intercultural Dynamics in the British Isles Today,” hosted by Brunel University in April 2001, all of these papers in their

different ways contribute to a critique of the facile rhetoric of normalisation that underlies the dominant definition of “multiculturalism.” Instead, the conference—and this collection—asked delegates to think through the reality of cultural difference by using the alternative metaphor of “braiding.” The threads of cultural difference are here seen not as parallel lines evolving separately but are brought together into a new entity in which juxtaposition, contact and contamination produces a new narrative that is different from a mere sum of its constituent parts.

In some ways, as Peter Childs reminds us, the braiding of “Britain” is particularly apposite because “Britishness” has always been a “hyphenated” identity—an identity in which difference has always been present. Drawing on the highly influential work of Linda Colley, he reminds us that the term “Britain” was not only predicated on the difference between what was seen as the Protestant Isles and its Other—namely Catholic France—in the eighteenth century, but it was also invented to accommodate cultural differences within the state itself. Occupying as it did a liminal space in the discourses of statehood that constituted it—the contrary pulls of the less culturally determined notion of “kingdom” on the one hand, and the more culturally particularist ideas of “nation” on the other—it is perhaps unsurprising that Britain could only make sense in terms of the compounds suggest by the hyphen: English-British; Scottish-British; Welsh-British. On the other hand, as the Scots and Welsh would no doubt point out, the signifier “Britain” has always had the potential to de-hyphenate, to subsume cultural difference into the “norm” of the majority: Britain was (and still remains), in the eyes of many, co-terminous with “Englishness.” This de-hyphenation finds its contemporary echo in the rhetoric of normalisation voiced by, amongst others, the “Home” Secretary.

Mike Wayne offers a salutary reminder that the pressures that effect the (re)formation of identity are not solely from “within” but also in a complex dialectic with how Britain sees itself in relation to how others see it. What results is the dissemination of ideas of “Britishness” that are at least partially determined by the “international image markets” within which forms of media representation, especially cinema, are distributed. Discourses of “Britishness” that are in currency in, for example, America and Europe are important in the way the British film industry promotes what “Britishness” is; in turn, this has an effect on the domestic perception of “Britishness” itself. In other words, the key theoretical point to be taken from this is that the simplistic notion of an autochthonous revision of identity is impossible. It is not just a case of how Britain is seen and defined “at home” but also how it is perceived “abroad” —by “foreigners.” This, of course, deconstructs the binaries of “home” and “abroad,” “domestic” and “foreign.” As Derrida has suggested, self-identity is achieved by the expulsion of difference, which nevertheless always haunts the “cleansed” term with the mark of its difference, this trace being precisely what is needed to constitute the identity in the first place. One cannot talk, then, of inside and outside, home and abroad, us and them.

In a different context, these issues are also taken up by Gail Low in her survey and analysis of the complex social, cultural and institutional processes underlying the formation of “West Indian Literature.” This, of course, consequently impacted on notions of “West Indianness” —and therefore conceptions of “home” and identity— for a generation of migrants from the Caribbean, as well as for that generation of “indigenes” who received them in Britain. This dialectic of “home” and “foreign,” “Britain” and, amongst others, the “West Indies,” and the delicate negotiation between the perspectives from which these terms were viewed was a central feature

of the diasporisation of Britain. Indeed, it is one of the ironies of this process that notions of “home” for immigrant communities are often embedded in discourses of cultural identity that only make sense “abroad” —in this case, Britain. In other words, other than on the cricket pitch, the term West Indies made sense for immigrants from the Caribbean only once they left and arrived in “Old Brit’n,” as Selvon called it. This in turn reflects back upon how existing colonial discourses on racial and cultural identity have affected the construction of the new diasporic identities. Low considers the desire for “local colour” and “authenticity” from publishers who were, at this time, eager to publish Caribbean writers. Indeed, one of the greatest of them, Sam Selvon, was felt to be especially palatable for metropolitan literary tastes because of his “authentic” folk idiom. Underlying this, of course, are the traditional Eurocentric judgements about universalism which led to a covert patronising of these writers, even from well-meaning critics. Just how much ideas of “West Indian” identity came to be affected by metropolitan exoticism is a question worth pondering.

Christiane Schlote, in her essay, “‘Im British But...’: Explorations of Identity by Three Postcolonial British Women Artists,” takes a deeper look at the processes of diasporisation as they have been felt in the lives and work of the writers Rukhsana Ahmad and Meera Syal, and the sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp. Her comparative perspective is especially illuminating because the “location” of each of these artists within the diasporic space of Britain is different. Ahmad was born and raised in a conservative middle-class Pakistani household before migrating to Britain; Camp, who describes herself as travelling “among global cultures,” has nevertheless retained in her work the cultural influences of her native Nigeria, even though she was schooled in Britain as a boarding pupil; and Syal, the most well-known of the three, was born and raised in the West Midlands. Each of them has responded, therefore, in

different ways to their “racialisation” and the expectations of the “exotic” that such differentiation often involves. Much of Syal’s work, for instance, undercuts the expectations of the exotic by grounding itself firmly, and humorously, in the far from exotic soil of the Midlands. Rukhsana Ahmad has deconstructed stereotypical western imaginings of Pakistani women and Camp, in the very materiality of her work on metal sculptures and the sometimes shocking (for western audiences) insertion of, for instance, blood in her work, has both resisted notions of appropriate femininity in Nigeria and transgressed cultural expectations and norms in Britain. Schlote shows how the work of all three artists demonstrates the complicating articulation of cultural difference by social identities such as gender and class which traverse cultural differences – again, something that “multiculturalism” as we know it ignores.

“Multiculturalism,” “diaspora,” “ethnicity” and so on are terms which have been particularly associated with postcolonial studies, and in the British context, have been explored most insistently by “black” British thinkers such as Hall, Brah, Bhabha, and Gilroy. This has often led to the unwelcome identification of these issues with “Black British studies.” However, as Peter Childs suggests, the idea of “Britain” has always been, as it were, “multicultural.” The classification of these issues into a racialised ghetto is unhelpful particularly since in recent years “post-colonial” Britain must also refer to devolution. The “Celtic fringe” as it has been called can no longer be seen in such terms precisely because they accentuate those ideas of centre and periphery that underline the rhetoric of normalisation. Notwithstanding the presence of large non-white ethnic communities in these devolved societies which are complicating older notions of Scottishness, Welshness and so on, the Scots, the Welsh, the Cornish, the Manx and, of course, the Irish have all contributed significant

strands to the braiding of Britain—though, of course, the last of these being British is hotly contested and problematic.

Amanda Griffin’s socio-cultural analysis of the Manx Music Festival demonstrates how a Manx identity has been fostered by the annual repetition of the event. Its origins and subsequent development also illustrate, however, that for all its Manx-ness, it is embedded in the wider cultural terrain of British and European culture. A product of processes of Anglicisation in the Victorian period, it has also attracted criticism from those who see it as not being sufficiently “authentic” because it does not include “traditional” Manx culture. Once again, the question of tradition and authenticity makes itself felt as the boundaries of centre and periphery are negotiated and re-negotiated. Interestingly, Griffin also notes the impact of what may be termed the “Manx diaspora” in the shape of the migrant Manx community of Cleveland, Ohio. The involvement of the Cleveland Manx in the Manx Music Festival and the construction of a modern Manx identity therefore offers suggestive parallels with the way other communities have constructed notions of “home” *in absentia*.

Hugh O’Donnell’s fascinating comparison of three minority-language soap operas in Scotland, Ireland and the Basque Country also allows us to consider the whole question of “minority-ness” and the politics of language and identity. This resonates significantly when juxtaposed to the proposed English-language classes for new immigrants. The absence of dedicated institutional frameworks such as a Gaelic-language channel in Scotland and the lack of a political project in which the maintenance of the Gaelic language is an important aspect are just two of the reasons why the soap *Machair* did not survive, in contrast to its Irish and Basque counterparts. In other words, Gaelic as a language is not seen to be essential to the formation and preservation of a Scottish cultural identity. As O’Donnell points out, *Machair*

addressed a “Gaelic-speaking island identity [for which] Edinburgh was as far away mentally as London.” The dangers of cultural isolationism because of wistful dreams of authenticity are apparent: will the Gaelic-speaking cultures of northern Scotland survive? Are they to continue as part of the story of Britain, as a thread in the British braid, or will their trace one day only be found—like, perhaps, Cornish in West Country dialects—in various Scots dialects? Conversely, will other “minority” languages survive? Already, despite possessing strong cultural affiliations to their parents’ and grandparents’ cultures, Asian youth in Britain are beginning to lose competency in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and so on, and many children of Afro-Caribbean descent cannot speak the Creole of their ancestral islands. On the other hand, new languages are emerging which reflect the hybrid cultural space of postcolonial Britain. The “street” languages of Southall, Brixton and a host of other localities await linguistic and sociological analysis. What makes these languages, how “minority” languages survive, what resources they draw on, how they carve a space of significance—and signification—within the dominant discursive frameworks are questions which deserve urgent attention.

In her essay on Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Rose Atfield discusses the relative importance of gender and language in the work of two major female Irish poets. In Boland’s work, Atfield detects a greater concern with the issue of gender than in Ní Dhomhnaill’s. Again, the fact that Boland writes in English and Ní Dhomhnaill writes in Irish may be especially significant here. Working in a minority language perhaps demands greater attention to the issue of language itself—its sustenance and development, and the resistance to the power of the dominant language—whereas the very centrality of English means that language is less of an issue for Boland. Accordingly, Boland is at relative liberty to explore the discursive

silences and suppressions *within* English from the point of view of gender. It seems that there is a strategic awareness on Ní Dhomhnaill's part that the issue of language in relation to what Atfield calls "dual colonialism" is what demands most attention. Identifying Irish itself with femininity, Ní Dhomhnaill is perhaps enacting in her poetry a "dual resistance:" to colonialism and patriarchy.

Finally, it is a great pleasure to be able to conclude with an essay by the great Guyanese writer Wilson Harris. Harris's essay, "The Theatre of the Arts," occupies the "sensitive" boundary between criticism and creativity, "fact" and "fiction," argument and speculation. Such layered boundaries create a challenging text. Harris's plea for a gnostic "theatre of the arts" may not suit or appeal to all tastes, but his attempt to question the "fixity" of absolute categories of space and culture does possess certain affinities to new thinking and theorising on notions such as "diaspora" and "diaspora space" (as conceived by Avtar Brah); to Gilroy's move from "rooted" to "routed" identities; and the flux that processes of displacement (whether voluntary or involuntary) impose upon identities, cultures and environments. From the point of view of a moving world—a world constantly on the move, be it peoples, ideas, labour, or capital: a movement that is, perhaps, the fundamental characteristic of that latest phase in capitalist modernity which we now term "globalisation" —Harris's speculations on the "measurelessness," as he puts it, of such processes perhaps does require his kind of mythopoeic language in order to give them shape and form, however temporarily.

The conference foregrounded creativity. Plenary speakers included practising artists—among them, not only the novelist Wilson Harris, but the theatre director Jatinder Verma, and the director of the cross-cultural Grand Union orchestra, Tony Haynes, whose talks are represented here, as well as the Guyanese flautist Keith

Waithe who gave an unforgettable performance. The conference's evening programmes of readings by a wide range of poets and novelists from many different British communities played an important part in establishing its ethos. One of the organisers' intentions was to breach the barriers which tend to be erected between British cultures of ancient origin and those of more recent presence in these islands, by juxtaposing contributions on, and from, both. The Welsh poet Iwan Llwyd, whose work (arising from the conference) is included in *EnterText* 1.2, reminded delegates of the diversity of language practice within Britain by reading his poems first in Welsh and then in English. It is therefore also central to the commemorative concept of this issue of *EnterText* that the academic papers are interwoven with new work from some of the participating writers, Bernardine Evaristo, Grace Nichols, Romesh Gunsekera, John Agard and E. A. Markham. One of the latter's poems offers a telling response to the events of 11 September, while another is presented not only in English, but translated into five European languages—a reminder of the braiding of Britishness with Europeanness, and of our interconnections throughout the wider global linguistic communities. Also we are pleased to publish a new short story by Aamer Hussein, and an extract, about growing up in Guyana in the 1920s, from the autobiography of Cécile Nobrega, a work-in-progress which was inspired by her participation in the British Braids conference.

I would like to conclude this introduction by returning to the metaphor of the braid. Many of the essays in this collection take a materialist perspective to the study of culture. "Braiding" as it is presented here is not just about the threading together of culture, but also about the threading of these cultures through the social, economic, and political fields within which they operate. Returning once again to the Home Secretary's intervention, the terms of the debate which have surrounded it have led to

the disarticulation of culture from its political and economic environments by embedding it rather in a discourse of “norms,” “values” and “identity.” By treating the issue of identity (and culture) quite independently of the social, political and economic positions of those for whom “identity” with Britain is said to be a problem—and it seems that Britain’s Islamic communities come top of this particular list—the “problem of identity” is itself abstracted. This abstraction mirrors the rhetoric of the far right for whom “identity” is not just an issue—it is the *only* issue: you either belong or you don’t; you are either one of “us” or one of “them.” The idea of “braiding” as it is presented in this volume, with its emphasis on the delicate weaving together (articulation) of differences, resists not only the rhetoric of normalisation but also the abstractions on which it rests. It *insists* on the articulation of cultural identities by other “social” forms. When placed in the context of immigrants learning English, this involves reframing the debate so that one might suggest that English should be learnt not in order that “they” might become one of “us” but rather because they might gain access to the material benefits that learning English would deliver. The same could be said of the debate about “race relations.” Blacks and Asians in Britain today *want* to talk about race, but not in terms of abstractions. Instead, race needs to be debated in relation to the institutionalised disadvantages facing ethnic minorities with regard to education, housing, employment, health care and so on. This is what constitutes the real “problem” of race and identity in (and with) Britain. Immigrants are not merely culturally alienated, but are also economically disadvantaged, socially marginalised, and politically disenfranchised. Why, in this context, would such communities *want* to identify with Britain? To begin to find the answers to such problems does not just require hard

thinking. It also involves posing the right set of questions, setting the terms of debate in such a way as to be able to focus on them.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian*, 10 December 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 392-403; Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996).