Representing British Bangladeshis in the Global City: Authenticity, Text and Performance

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the ways in which people seek to represent the social, cultural and political life of British Bangladeshis in London's 'East End' through different textual genres. These representations inevitably involve the issue of authenticity – not only people's claims to be 'insiders' but also competing claims about who are the 'real' or most authentic insiders. Authenticity is also established within the context of place – local, national and transnational – and involves people engaging with wider social, cultural and political changes across the 'global city', Britain and beyond the national border to Bangladesh in particular. Specific places provide arenas where people can act out their claims to be the authentic voice of 'their community' and challenge the authority of others.

Keywords: Bangladeshis, Global City, Authenticity, Text, Performance

Introduction: Representing the 'East End' through Texts: An Historical Outline

During the 19th century London's 'East End' rapidly expanded though a combination of an expanding settled population and the influx of migrants from the surrounding countryside and further afield. Migrants particularly crowded into localities such as Spitalfields on the eastern boundary of the City of London. Late 17th century French (Huguenot) immigrants were followed by Irish Catholics in first half of the 19th century and as conditions declined, Spitalfields and the East End, in general, became associated with grinding poverty, criminality and aliens. The stereotype of London's dangerous, exotic Other was established through the writing of novelists such as Dickens and 'yellow press' journalists[1] and found its most enduring expression in the 'moral panic' surrounding the 'Jack the Ripper' murders between 1888 and 1891. One of the key social conditions for this moral panic was the arrival of poor immigrants – East European Jews – and the anti-Semitic nerve, which this touched, both locally and nationally (see Fishman, 1988; Kershen, 1997).

This representation of the East End did not go unchallenged, however. A more sympathetic portrait was developed by Zangwill (1892), whose parents were East European Jewish

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[1] This term refers to the sensationalist, down market newspapers of the late 19th century whose lurid stories appealed to a wider readership than the more respectable broadsheets – a difference in approach towards journalism still evident today, of course.

immigrants. A more sensationalist account was written by a local journalist and art collector, Arthur Morrison (1896) through a blend of fact and fiction, which develops another persistent theme – the struggle to escape the 'ghetto'. This theme was elaborated by second generation local Jewish writers during the 1920s and 1930s (see Eade, 2000; 2007; Worpole, 1983), through their stories of how people tried to lead respectable lives amidst economic insecurity, poor housing and limited amenities.

These writers were joined by other observers and commentators. The vivid portrait of London life by Mayhew (1851) was followed by Charles Booth's magisterial mapping of poverty across the metropolis (1903) and the more narrowly academic study led by Llewellyn Smith (1930-1935). Newspapers continued to be a major source of information about social life in the East End and their 'human interest' stories were complemented by the well established genre of tourist guides where journalism, travel writing and autobiography mingled with visual representations, especially photography (see Eade, 2000). The development of radio and film also contributed to this expanding flow of reportage so that 'outsiders' came to 'know' this area of London far more intimately than any other. The growth of municipal socialism led to another form of representation – overviews of local needs presented by council officials. During the Second World these streams of academic, media and council officials overlapped to some extent through the mass observation movement, which combined with radio, film, newspapers and central and local government officials to show how local people were coping. The East End was again shown in a positive light as representing a nation determined to resist foreign attack.

After the Second World War two major and interconnected developments – rebuilding and rehousing people further east – were famously analysed by Young and Willmott in their 1957 account of the break-up of the Bethnal Green working class. One of the reasons for their study's enduring appeal is its use of a concept crucial to sociological discourse – community. In urban sociology we can trace the use of community as a master trope to the 1920s Chicago School. What made its use so effective in the context of the East End, however, was Young and Willmott's carefully grounded demonstration of how social ties could endure despite – or perhaps because of – poverty, job insecurity and poor housing. Moving out to the suburbs may have brought material comfort but it did not deliver emotional contentment, since people were parted from the interlocking ties of family and kinship which sustained the strong sense of community in Bethnal Green. Their account supported in other words a positive image of an impoverished East End and movement into the suburbs, which the Chicago School helped to explain in terms of an urban structure, was portrayed as a social loss.

Having briefly outlined the key tropes established by the diverse literature concerning the East End before the emergence of the Bangladeshi community, I will turn to the different ways in which that community has been represented through texts and through our AHRC workshop. After a discussion of academic analyses I will consider the performance of texts by artists before exploring the role of a Bangladeshi heritage group in representing the community through oral history. The focus will then move to an examination of a well known novel and autobiography, which explores local and global links, before concluding with a controversial study which sought to update Willmott and Young's 1950s portrait of working class life.

Representing Post-War Multicultural London: Academic Analyses of Bangladeshi Settlement

Although London has long relied on global trade, after the Second World War the flows of capital, goods and information changed considerably. Trading links with the empire and then the Commonwealth weakened as economic and political ties with Continental Europe strengthened. Even so, London's contemporary role as a global business and finance centre has not only been built on regional competition with other European cities, such as Frankfurt, Paris and Amsterdam, but also as a haven for increasingly mobile flows of capital from North America and the Pacific region in particular. The metropolis has continued to be deeply divided socially and economically but these divisions are driven far more by a globalised service sector and a changing pattern of immigration (see Sassen, 1991; Fainstein, Gordon and Harloe, 1992; Fainstein, 1994; Eade, 2000; Vertovec, 2007).

The arrival and settlement of those from British (ex)colonies during the 1950s and 1960s played a key part in the rapid racialisation of London's population. In the case of the Bangladeshis, although seamen (*lascars*) from the Bengal delta had been coming to London's docks since the 19th century, they did not form settled communities until the 1970s.[2] Significantly, they did not concentrate in Bethnal Green but in Spitalfields and adjoining wards where there was a relatively high proportion of cheap rented accommodation near the garment factories, which provided ample opportunities for low paid, seasonal work and outworking. Brick Lane and its adjoining streets, built by the Huguenots, became the commercial heart of a new 'community' and one building, in particular, came to represent the succession of immigrants in the area – the Huguenot chapel, which became a Jewish religious centre before it emerged as the Great Mosque (*Jamme Masjid*).

With the arrival of wives and dependants during the 1980s and early 1990s a settled Bangladeshi community emerged. The most recent estimates indicate that approximately 40,000 Bangladeshis live in Tower Hamlets, i.e. just under 30% of Tower Hamlets' residents and 40% of London's total Bangladeshi population. It was a relatively young population since 50% were 15 years old compared with 30% of those from white British backgrounds and concentrated in the western wards of the borough (Tower Hamlets Final Local Implementation Plan for Approval, 2005).

The first influential exploration of the Bangladeshi (primarily Sylheti) first generation's experience of migration was produced by Caroline Adams (1987). Her book is divided into two main sections – the first provides a history of Sylhet, the *lascars*' journeys between the Bengal delta and Britain and the emergence of a community. She draws these threads together in the final sombre paragraph of this section:

> The Bangladeshi community in Britain began to take root, on the territory marked out by the first few casual pioneers who has found the way 'across seven seas and thirteen rivers' from Sylhet to Aldgate. Here at last was the memorial to those thousands of nameless sailors who died in cold water and blazing engine rooms. The Empire had finally come home (1987: 66).

The second section consists of ten interviews with those, who had stayed in Britain. They provide a vivid and invaluable insight into the experience of migration, continuing ties with

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[2] With the partition of British India in 1946 those arriving before 1971 came from the eastern wing of Pakistan. In 1971 an independent Bangladesh was created through force of arms.

homeland and the various movements across Britain as they sought work in the Midlands and North England industrial sector and/or made a life in the East End.

Like the later oral histories produced by Yousuf Choudhury (1993; 1995) these interviews reveal the pioneering spirit of these young, single men and their experience of a strange land where they had remained, sometimes by default and sometimes by design, into old age. This reflection on home and away is poignantly captured in the conclusion of the last interview:

> My pension is ten pounds forty-one pence a week. We live in one room in this rented house. If I went home, and I got my pension, I would be quite rich … but here I am not rich. I can't afford to go home now. My son is going to school, then he will work here.

> I have had a good life, I am happy, but my son will have a better life (Adams, 1987: 210).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s the second generation emerged as a potent force in local community and party politics. They were influenced by secular nationalist ideas in both Britain and Bangladesh, as well as by white left wing activists and those engaged in anti-racist campaigns across racial and ethnic divides. This development was analysed from an academic perspective by Eade (1989), who focussed on local struggles in Spitalfields between 1982 and 1986, which were shaped by wider forces – the campaigns for minority representation within the Labour Party across London, the changes introduced in the Greater London Council and in the Inner London Education Authority and political developments back in Bangladesh. Drawing on the Foucauldian approach towards power, knowledge and resistance Eade investigated the ways in which the young Bangladeshi activists represented 'their community' in the local political arena. Power was not controlled at the top of the party political structure but distributed through flows of people, information and ideas, which linked struggles in Spitalfields to political and cultural developments across Britain and Bangladesh.

Although the political discourse was dominated during the late 1970s and early 1980s by secular debates concerning anti-racism and class, it was already evident that issues concerning Islam were emerging at local and more global levels. Eade and his colleagues, especially Garbin, have contributed to a growing academic literature, which has focussed on the Islamisation of urban space and Muslim identity politics in the context of the global city (see: Eade, 1997; Eade, Fremeaux and Garbin, 2002; Eade and Garbin, 2002; Begum and Eade, 2005; Hussain, 2007; Eade, 2010); the increasingly complex power-geometry where race, ethnicity and class intersect (see Keith, 1995; 2008; Glynn, 2002; Back, Keith, Khan, Shukra and Solomos, 2009); the social and cultural ties between Bangladesh and Britain (See Gardner, 1995; 2002; Wemyss, 2006); the colonial heritage and post-colonial links (See Visram, 1986; 2002; Jacobs, 1996; Eade, 2000; Sinha, 2008; Wemyss, 2008; 2009); and comparisons between Bangladeshis and previous settlers (See Kershen, 1997; Fishman, 1997).

This expanding literature reflects the widening range of research interests and theoretical perspectives. It also reflects the funding available for policy oriented research, such as studies of housing, gender and urban space (see Phillips, 1998; Phillips, Davis and Ratcliffe, 2007; Begum, 2008), language and education and health issues (see Ahmed, 2008 and Marks and Hilder, 1997). The shift in emphasis towards Muslim or Islamic identity in public discourse – encouraged, of course, by British central government policies particularly in response to '9/11' and '7/7' and global geopolitical developments – is also associated with the increasing

prominence of religious centres, especially the East London Mosque on the borders of Spitalfields, and Islamist political and cultural organisations (see Eade, 2006).

The research has largely been undertaken by 'outsiders', who have sometimes worked together with second generation Bangladeshis (see, for example, Gardner and Shukur, 1994; Cohen, Qureshi and Toon, 1994; Begum and Eade, 2005; Phillips and Iqbal, 2009), while a few young Bangladeshi scholars have also published their own papers (see Nilufar Ahmed, 2005 and Delwar Hussain, 2007, for example). The representation of the community has largely been left to 'insiders' within the borough's political arena and among community organisations. The Spitalfields workshop, held as part of the AHRC project, enabled us to explore the different ways in which boundary between insiders and outsiders was drawn through the process of public representation. As we did so, the focus moved implicitly from the issue of textual representation to how texts were publicly performed.

Insiders and Outsiders: Performing Texts

The workshop built on a format established for the first event held in Bradford during June 2006. The intention was to bring together contributors to different genres of writing from both inside and outside the 'community', including writers, community organisers and political representatives. For the Tower Hamlets event we invited young artists, who had been interviewed for an oral history project led by Swadhinata, a local Bangladeshi heritage organisation. The director of the film version of the 2003 novel *Brick Lane*, by Monica Ali, was also invited. The session finally involved only two main contributors – the director of the Kobi Nazrul cultural centre where the workshop was held and a well known *baul* singer.

The centre is named after the renowned Bengali poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam. His anti-colonial, nationalist commitment was expressed through his diverse artistic outpourings and journalism and he became widely known as *bidrohi kobi* (rebel poet). Although he was born in West Bengal and lived in Kolkata for many years, he and his family moved to Dhaka after the creation of Bangladesh in 1972 where he died four years later. While he is commemorated as Bangladesh's national poet, he also represents a Bengali cultural heritage which transcends both national boundaries and religious differences. He was deeply influenced by the most celebrated member of the Bengal cultural renaissance, Rabindranath Tagore, as well as by Hindu scriptures, Persian poets and *baul* music (discussed in more detail below). His knowledge of Persian and Urdu enabled him to draw more traditional Bengali Muslims towards Bengali music through a process of Islamisation mediated through the *ghazal*,[3] i.e. a different form of Islamisation from that associated with contemporary purist discourse.

The director of the cultural centre was himself a well known Bengali artistic figure. He has long been involved in the Bengal language movement, wrote plays and directed films which have been shown in Britain and Bangladesh, and since the 1970s has employed these artistic talents in London to support the cause of anti-racism. In his contribution to the session he referred to a song he had written in 1978 about survival in the face of racism on Brick Lane, which was eventually aired on Channel 4. His engagement in public issues had continued down to the present day through his current involvement in such controversial issues as child abuse within the British Bangladeshi community. Through his artistic endeavour and his

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[3] A particular poetic form spread across the Indian sub-continent by Sufi mystics from the 12th century.

position as director of this local community centre, he helped to link his community to white outsiders, such as politicians, administrators, leaders of NGOs and artists.

However, like other community representatives he had to face criticism as the contribution by the *baul* singer made quite clear. Speaking in Sylheti, he launched into an impassioned critique of those, who claimed to represent the Bengali musical scene in Tower Hamlets. As his speech was slowly summarised by other Bangladeshi participants, it became clear that the issues of representation and public recognition were bound up with considerations about authenticity. The singer considered *baul* music to be the authentic voice of a Bengali folk tradition, which was developed over centuries by itinerant singers across the Bengal delta. The music drew on both Hindu bhakti[4] and Muslim mystical traditions and the singers most frequently accompanied their songs with the *ektara*, a single stringed instrument. Although the tradition was in decline, it still survives in Bangladesh, West Bengal and the Bangladeshi diaspora and provides a devotional space where Muslims can meet others, especially Hindus.

Not surprisingly, given the venue, the link between Nazrul Islam and the *baul* tradition informed the singer's discourse on authenticity. The link was made more explicit in an interview he gave for the Swadhinata oral history project. He described the fundamental role played by *baul* music and its influence on Tagore and Nazrul Islam, as well as the way in which Kobi Nazrul linked Bengal's rivers to the heart of the Muslim world, Madina, where the Prophet was buried:

> All [Bengali] music has evolved from the Baul songs, and the Ektara is the first instrument of Baul songs. … All the poets who have composed songs, whether the pastoral songs or the local songs of the Lalon Geeti[5], all the music has their roots in Baul music. … That is why Nazrul and Rabindranath have written this kind of songs. … For example, Nazrul wrote: 'Oh boatman, take me to Madina' (Eade, Ullah, Iqbal and Hey, 2006: 129).

While the singer celebrated a rich tradition of folk music from his country of origin, the director focussed on the Kobi Nazrul Centre's role in providing a platform for all kinds of contemporary cultural events where topical issues could be addressed. He described his long established contribution to the community's political and cultural life, especially struggles against discrimination, and to illustrate this further he left after the session to get a tape of his music to play for us accompanied by the English translation.[6]

The contribution by the two Bangladeshi cultural experts can be seen as a performance about how to represent authentically the community's cultural heritage to both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. It was a performance shaped not only by ethnicity but also by the intersection of gender, generation and class. Moreover, in a broader perspective we can place their performance within two different musical traditions - the hybrid tradition of *baul* singing in

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[4] Devotional songs particularly associated with Vaishnava Hindu sects which deeply Bengali Hindu society.

[5] Songs written by Lalon Shah during the 19th century.

[6] A sense of the issues can be seen in some of the lines from the Bengali lyrics (translated by Hemayet Hossain and edited by me) – 'Aftaf, Ishaque and Kenneth Blair, all of them were hunted by a racist (ugly) culture. How long would this atrocity continue? How often would humanity weep about such brutality happening inside the mask of civil society. Banish the culture of racism forever. … Welcome all races to get together in order to get rid of racism ... The flame of protest still burning in the heart will remain forever. The number of lives sacrificed has caused us grief. This bitter memory of these bloody days appears as a shining polar star. We welcome all humanists to come together for the betterment of humankind'.

the Bengal cultural region and a more recent hybridised mode of using Bengali music to speak more politically about discrimination and disadvantage in Britain.

However, in the ensuing discussion the distinction between these genres was questioned. As one contributor pointed out, *baul* music is being adapted by young British Bangladeshis, who are also drawing on Hindi film music, *qawwali* and other genres to express their experiences of life in Britain. *Baul* musicians are contributing to this multicultural ferment through their performances at various festivals in Spitalfields, such as the Bengal New Year celebration (*baishakhi mela*). Local activities are enmeshed in transnational networks as British Bangladeshi groups work with *baul* performers from both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Subhendu 'Bapi' Das Baul, for example, had moved from Kolkata to Paris and then London, where he worked with (among others) the celebrated British Bangladeshi group, Asian Dub Foundation, based in the shiny Rich Mix Centre close to Brick Lane. This combination of old and new is well described in one of the following website articles on him and his group, Baul Bishwa:

> Their concerts are invitations to discover their world, the world of ancient wandering minstrels from Bengal who believe in simplicity in life and love. This philosophy is strongly reflected in their songs, which are all about love and joy … [He] remains faithful to his traditions, which are also present in his music. He also uses traditional instruments on stage.
>
> On the other hand, he is always seeking new things. For instance, he started working on rhythm and a new way of singing. His music has taken him around the world, and in Europe he has worked with many great artists. … Even Madonna was intrigued by his talent and invited him in 2001 to record something together. Through these experiences he discovered different kinds of music and musical instruments (Classics Online).

While public events, such as the Bengali New Year celebrations have enabled *baul* singers to reach out to those beyond the British Bangladeshi community, the ways in which *baul* music seeks to transcend social and cultural differences have been sharply criticised by leaders at the East London Mosque (see Eade and Garbin, 2002; 2006). The Kobi Nazrul Centre and the poet it was named after also fell foul of those associated with this mosque and other Islamist purifiers. The centre provides a platform for cultural traditions which they wish 'real Muslims' to disavow, and Nazrul's openness to different religious and cultural traditions does not accord with their exclusivist calls for pure Islamic practice.

These issues of authenticity, representation and the boundaries between insiders and outsiders also informed the part played by language during this session. After the first workshop at Bradford we decided to try to encourage the use of other languages than just English. Yet although contributors were encouraged to use whatever language they wished – in this context English, standard Bengali and Sylheti – any sustained attempt to translate everything that the *baul* singer said in Sylheti, for example, would have prevented us from keeping to the day's tight schedule. English remained the dominant medium of communication and, in fact, it implicitly enhanced the representative status of those Bangladeshis, who could use all three linguistic codes.

Oral History – What is Left Out or the Muslim Elephant in the Room

The contested arena around creativity and religion can also be explored through another example – an oral history project involving the Swadhinata Trust and my own research

centre, CRONEM. The Trust was established in 2000 as a 'London based non-partisan secular Bengali group that works to promote Bengali history and heritage amongst young people' (Swadhinata Trust website). The need for such an organisation was justified in the following terms:

> an absence of documentation and social data representing Bengalis' heritage, historical presence and achievements internationally, can contribute towards a sense of marginalisation, low self-esteem and alienation of young people in particular, as part of a minority ethnic community within wider society. This, in turn, can limit their participation and contributions to mainstream culture (ibid.).

The oral history project sought to fulfil its aims by describing 'three generations' experience of being Bengali in multicultural Britain' (see Eade *et al.*, 2006: 7) and made a successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund with CRONEM's support. Three themes were explored through interviews with 58 respondents – (i) the history of Bangladesh and the 1971 war of independence' through the eyes of the first generation, (ii) community activism during the 1970s and 1980s, especially anti-racist and political mobilisation and (iii) musical creativity involving younger British Bangladeshis. CRONEM's role was to provide academic expertise, recruit and pay the Project Manager and to collaborate with Swadhinata during the data collection and production of the outputs – a book based on over 50 interviews, training young Bangladeshis in interview and media skills and creating a work book to be used in local schools. The project, therefore, helped to offset the lack of insider voices which is so evident in academic publications but it did so through collaboration rather than in opposition to academic outsiders and fully acknowledged the contribution of white British people to the historical events discussed by the study.

The project raised a number of important issues but the one I wish to discuss here concerns the deliberate ignoring of Muslim identity and the Islamisation process in particular. The Trust's leaders came from the second generation of secular nationalists whom I had met during the early 1980s during my research on British Bangladeshi identity politics and with whom I had maintained contact subsequently. They were connected in various ways to the Awami League, whose leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was intimately associated with the creation of an independent Bangladesh in 1971 and the initial enthusiasm for secular nationalism based on the Bengali language and cultural traditions.

Given Swadhinata's political leanings, the book, *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, began, in its first section, by recounting the older generation's involvement in the events leading up to the creation of an independent Bangladesh. Although 14 of the 22 interviewees are Bangladeshi Muslim men, the contribution by others is reflected in interviews with four Bangladeshi Muslim women, three white British people (two male and one female) and a Bengali Hindu male. The interviews make clear the crucial role played by networks and alliances across Britain, Continental Europe and Bangladesh, which ranged across political and social divisions. As the member of one of the action groups explained:

> We were involved in campaigns, we sent so many goods, volunteers in Bangladesh through Calcutta. … through Action Bangladesh … we called the meeting in Trafalgar Square, that was largest gathering in memory, Bengali gatherings. No other organisations in this country until now could call and gather 25,000 people … Besides that we used to go and demonstrate against the Chinese Embassy, Pakistan High Commission and other High Commission or embassy, who were against the independence of Bangladesh. … The other things we used to do were the street drama, showing the way the Pakistani people

were torturing the people of Bangladesh … [In] Action Bangladesh we had about 50 English and Bengali people. … We demonstrated against the cricket [series] … Pakistan was visiting at that time. (Eade *et al.*, 2006: 29)

Students were also recruited to the cause and their political knowledge was respected by those who were less well educated but not everyone supported the campaign:

We got less support from the restaurant proprietors, because they were worried about their own properties in Bangladesh. We got help from ordinary Bangladeshis working class people. Saturday and Sunday used to be closed day, and they could give their time to organise things, go to people, go to restaurants, go to meetings (2006: 30).

This willingness to work across social and cultural divisions among Bangladeshis and across the boundary between Bangladeshis and others typified the second generation of community activists interviewed during the oral history project. However, given the earlier discussion of musical hybridity, the interviews with artists in the third section of the study provide the most useful illustrations of this inclusive approach. One contributor explained the compatability between Islam and an inclusive musical approach by referring to his respectable Muslim role model:

I follow Mohammed Rafi because … he was away from all kinds of cigarettes, wine, betel leaf and all the objectionable drugs. I was not lucky enough to see him but I have heard it from many people. … And he was pious. … He sang spiritual songs, ghazals, film songs and also Bhajan [folk songs] with great success. He was a very good singer of Bengali, Punjabi and Urdu folk songs. He even sang English songs (2006: 119).

The reputation of artists as respectable Muslims was even more important, perhaps, for female performers. As one prominent singer explained, in the highly charged atmosphere of the festivals (*melas)* they could be targets for some males in the audience:

One of the reasons … [why] I stopped doing melas for a while [is] … when I go on … stage [now], unfortunately, at least the [front] two rows of the crowd … get extremely violent. They throw things as soon as they see women. These boys or people who do this – I feel very sorry for them, because they are representing a community at the end of the day … When I come on … stage … I am not revealing myself clothes-wise. I am a respectable girl, I come from a respected family … There are thousands of people, who come to watch, they come from respected families … If I behave in an obnoxious manner, I am actually offending my culture, my religion, my people (2006: 123).

The contributors to the oral history project certainly showed how Bangladeshis could engage transnationally with a range of traditions and social groups and not feel that such an inclusive approach compromised their identity as Muslims. The boundary between Bangladeshis as insiders and those beyond was both flexible and dynamic – it lacked the hard, exclusive edge encouraged by those Muslims who wished to purify Islamic practice through the sharp separation between religion and culture.

Writing about Tower Hamlets: Representing a Minority and a Locality through the Novel and Autobiography

The most well-known artistic representation of Bangladeshi life in Britain was produced not by these musical artists but by the novelist, Monica Ali. *Brick Lane* (2003) centres around the

heroine, Nazneen, who comes from Bangladesh to live with her husband and two daughters on a dilapidated council estate near Brick Lane. She gradually frees herself from the seclusion of a traditional Bangladeshi housewife and becomes involved with a Bangladeshi community activist, who seeks to bring others back to a pure Islam. Freedom, however, is not found in the arms of a man but through her relationship with her daughters and other Bangladeshis. The book ends not in Brick Lane but in the glitzy surroundings of the City of London. They go to an ice rink and as her friend, Razia, prepares to skate, Nazneen exclaims:

> … 'But you can't skate in a sari'
>
> Razia was already lacing her boots. 'This is England', she said. 'You can do whatever you like' (2003: 41).

Although Monica Ali links Brick Lane to Bangladesh primarily through the story of Nazneen's relationship with her sister, it is the London context which is relevant here. While the book's commercial success, bolstered by the film, put the place, Brick Lane, on the mainstream map far more effectively than the other texts we have discussed here, it also attracted the ire of some local Bangladeshis. Between 2003 and 2006 various protests were made and media reports raised a number of interesting issues about the relationship between fact and fiction, community image and representation. The initial protest was led by the Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council soon after the book's nomination by the Booker Prize jury for the Guardian First Book Award. In an 18 page letter to the publisher the group complained that Bangladeshis were not only described as economic migrants but also as 'ignorant' (BBC News Online, 2003). The BBC report on the protest noted, for example, that Nazneen's husband describes local Bangladeshis as '"uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition"' (ibid.).

The controversy died down only to be revived during 2006 by plans to film on Brick Lane itself. This time the protest was led by Mahmoud Rouf, the chair of the Brick Lane Business Association, who claimed that while the book was 'a good work of literature', it was 'insulting to the community.' He presented his group as reflecting the views of the local community:

> Monica Ali does not belong to the community. She has written a book that is just guesswork.
>
> People are disgusted about the film, and while the authorities have given permission for it to be filmed here, it does not mean they have permission from the community.
>
> We will do what the community wants us to do. We are not going to leave it as it is (BBC News Online, 2006).

Later in July 2006 the plan to film was dropped on the advice of the police and the borough council but a demonstration still went ahead in Brick Lane. The BBC report explained that local hostility had been generated by the way in which the book portrayed Brick Lane as a place:

> … some local Bangladeshis claim the novel insults them specifically, by being named after the street in which they live and work. … They say Ms Ali portrays Bangladeshis as uneducated and unsophisticated, and repeatedly mention a passage which they say has Bangladeshis coming over to England in the hold of a ship and with lice in their hair (Cacciottolo, 2006).

As one of the organisers declared:

> This hard-working community has been offended by lies, slander and cynicism. There should be a limit to what you can write or say. You can write fiction, but you cannot use names that are reality. The reality is Brick Lane (ibid.).

The misrepresentation of the community was compounded by the assumption by outsiders that Monica Ali was an insider:

> She [Ali] has imagined ideas about us in her head. She is not one of us, she has not lived with us, she knows nothing about us, but she has insulted us. … This is all lies. She wanted to be famous at the cost of a community (Lea and Lewis, 2006).

Although her father came from Bangladesh, he was not a Sylheti and he had married a white English woman. Monica Ali was brought up in a 'mixed race', middle class world far from the East End and had married a white English professional. As with *The Satanic Verses* controversy, the author's credentials as an insider – Salman Rushdie's identity as a Muslim and Monica Ali's as a Bangladeshi – were challenged as well as the author's claim to artistic freedom when writing about certain topics and social groups (see Riaz, 2008). Despite the passions roused by the book the protesters insisted that they would avoid the opprobrium generated by the burning of *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford during the late 1980s:

> Assurances were given by local businessman and protest organiser Abdus Salique that the widely-reported plans to burn copies of the book were incorrect (Cacciottolo, 2006).

The protesters' claim to represent a community consensus about the book ignored the reality that local Bangladeshis were not united in their views about the book and whether to film in Brick Lane. As the film company, Ruby Films, noted, some were willing to advise or to even more closely involved:

> Throughout the production process of Brick Lane we have maintained constant contact with members of the local community, some of whom are involved in the film as both consultants and crew (BBC News Online, 2006).

The film producer, Sarah Gavron, was related to the co-author of another important publication about the locality, which will be discussed later, and could call on a range of local Bangladeshi contacts. However, the public protests and hostility from prominent figures were enough to convince the local authorities to advise against filming.

Another publication – *The Islamist (*2007) – also generated considerable, if less public controversy within the locality. The credentials of the author, Ed Hussain, as an insider were far stronger than Monica Ali's. He was born in the Tower Hamlets' neighbourhood of Mile End and attended local schools including Stepney Green, the boys' secondary school which was rapidly becoming dominated by Bangladeshis. The book recounts his journey through London's highly cosmopolitan Muslim space beginning with the rejection of his father's devotion to a renowned Sylheti *pir* and involvement in the reformist Young Muslim Organisation, closely associated with the East London Mosque, which was followed by membership of the more radical Hizb ut-Tahrir and then the Islamic Society of Britain. He eventually leaves with his non-Bangladeshi Muslim girlfriend to teach in Syria and Saudi Arabia but returns disillusioned to London and resumes his academic training at the University of London where he had taken his undergraduate degree.

He has come full circle both physically and ideologically and the book ends with his advocacy of a spiritual, moderate Islam and a rediscovery of the older generation's religious values. He claims that:

> Many British Muslims are quietly developing a rich, vibrant Muslim sub-culture … incorporating the best aspects of their multi-faceted heritage: ethnic ancestry, British upbringing, Islamic roots. This harmony is borne out of the silent majority of law-abiding and loyal Muslims who work hard in business and the professions across Britain, not seeking to turn religion into politics. Such people help maintain the National Health Service, our schools, transport system , and other core areas of national life. They, not the jihadis, are the true heroes of British Islam (2007: 284).

Ed Hussain's account demonstrates how the local and global are intimately linked through political struggle. He contends that the government has helped to forge those links by supporting 'the expansion of the East London mosque into Europe's largest Islamist hub, the London Muslim Centre' and the 'Saudi-trained imam of the mega-mosque continues to lead a faction against modernizing elements, while 'the mild-mannered Dr Abdul Bari, a lifelong admirer of Mawdudi and public host of several leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami from Bangladesh and Pakistan during my involvement in the mosque now heads the Muslim Council of Britain' (2007: 280)[7]. Tower Hamlets' Islamist activists, who are satirised in Monica Ali's novel, are portrayed here as enemies of a peaceful, multicultural Britain aided and abetted by the state.

The Islamist attracted scant local attention but it prompted considerable attention in the national media. Critics of outsiders' engagement with such bodies as the Muslim Council of Britain, the main vehicle for Muslim identity politics under New Labour until the London bombings (McLoughlin, 2005), were quick to praise the book. Anushka Asthana in *The Observer* hailed the book as 'a wake-up call for Britain':

> Husain (*sic*) is appalled at the way unelected and unaccountable Islamist groups are portrayed by the media as representative. This captivating, and terrifyingly honest, book is his attempt to make amends for some of the wrongs he committed. In a wake-up call to monocultural Britain, it takes you into the mind of young fundamentalists, exposing places in which the old notion of being British is defunct (Asthana, 2007).

While Simon Jenkins writing in *The Sunday Times* commented that:

> Husain is appalled by the liberty given to the groups with whom he was involved and by the media space afforded to those claiming to speak for "British Islam", such as the Muslim Council of Britain. Nobody seems to have a clue which Muslims these people purport to represent, how they are elected or what is their agenda (Jenkins, 2007).

Others were more critical. Another former activist, Ziauddin Sardar, who has written his own memoir (2004), argued that Ed Hussain's 'suggestion that radicalisation of Muslim youth can be laid firmly on the door of [Hizb al-Tahrir]' is indicative of his 'reductive, one-dimensional' approach (Sardar, 2007), which fails to see that:

> The anger of young Muslims against the West has a much broader context. There was a great deal going on during the 1990s that agitated young Muslims and brought anti-

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[7] For background on Mawdudi and Islamic Revivalism, see Nasr (1995).

Western sentiment to the fore - from the first Gulf War to the genocide of Muslims in Chechnya.

When he finally realises his folly, and bids farewell to Hizb, Husain continues to be a reductive extremist. Now, the entire blame for the radicalisation of Muslim youth is placed on multiculturalism - the very idea that gave Husain all the opportunities he had in life! ….The occasional insight of Husain's memoir notwithstanding, The Islamist seems to have been drafted by a Whitehall mandarin as a PR job for the Blair government (ibid.).

Sardar's parting shot about government sympathy for the book is interesting since Ed Hussain went on to help establish The Quilliam Foundation, named after a famous English convert to Islam of the Victorian era. It claimed to be:

the world's first counter-extremism think tank. Located in London, our founders are former leading ideologues of UK-based extremist Islamist organizations – organizations that are still active today (Quilliam Foundation).

It contributed to the government's revision of its counter-terrorism strategy by rethinking how to tackle the causes of radicalisation over the long term. In March 2009 Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, explained that there would be a greater emphasis on developing a 'civil challenge':

Where people may not have broken the law but nevertheless act in a way that undermines our belief in this country, in democracy, in human rights, in tolerance, and free speech, there should be a challenge made to them, not through the law but through a civil challenge (Percival and agencies, 2009).

This rethinking of the government's strategy was quickly challenged by Muslim groups, however. According to Ummah Pulse, it revealed that:

there were rather too many briefings of government ministers made by blinkered rightwing pressure groups, namely the Policy Exchange, the Centre for Social Cohesion and the government-funded Quilliam Foundation who all like to peddle their poorly-researched, mediocre "big idea" namely that following the principles of Islam make one an "Islamist" and thus a threat to society (Hamdan, 2009).

The Islamist would appear at first sight to be very different from *Brick Lane*. Like the contributors to the Swadhinata oral history project, Ed Hussain has written a factual account based on his personal experience of life in the East End. This 'insider' perspective seems very different from the fictional narrative produced by someone who was brought up elsewhere in a middle class family by a white mother and a non-Sylheti father. However, appearances may be deceptive. As the postmodern turn has shown us, all narratives produce partial truths and autobiographies, oral histories, novels and academic research construct particular regimes of truth which are not rigidly separated from one another. These different textual genres are all bound up in the politics of writing so that while one reader may see *The Islamist*, for example, as an insider's factual account, another may agree with Ziauddin Sardar's suggestion that the book is a 'PR job for the Blair government'.

Past and Future: Class, Race and the Emergence of 'Docklands'

A recurrent feature of these disputes about local insiders and outsiders, community representation and different textual genres is the way in which the local and global interweave. The prestigious high rise offices on the edge of Spitalfields serve as physical reminders of how global forces are transforming the locality and this is even more dramatically by the Manhattanesque skyline of Canary Wharf in Tower Hamlets 'Docklands' area. Globalisation has produced a clear socio-economic divide between the borough's northern and southern localities, therefore. To the north, despite areas of gentrification, there are large swathes of social housing occupied by the remnants of the white working class and minority ethnic groups, predominantly Bangladeshi. In the south global corporations have moved in and their offices are staffed by white middle class commuters and those, who have bought the expensive new private housing along the river. White working class families cling to the former council estates, often benefitting from the 'right to buy' scheme, while the residual social housing has been allocated to those defined as high priority including Bangladeshi families (Foster, 1999).

Amid the rapid changes taking place in the south of the borough the ways in which tensions between poor residents took a racialised form have attracted academic attention (see Cohen, 1996 and Cohen *et. al.,* 1994). More recently, the tension between these two groups was further explored after the publication of *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict* (2006) co-authored by Geoff Dench, Michael Young and Kate Gavron, the step-mother of the *Brick Lane* film director, Sarah Gavron. The book's impact was partly based on its link with the influential Young and Willmott study introduced earlier in this paper. It also benefitted from the support it received from the well-connected Young Foundation, which was the revamped Institute of Community Studies established by (Lord) Michael Young in Bethnal Green. A further eye-catching feature of the book was its critique of urban policies pursued by central and local government since the 1950s. The authors argued that movement away from housing policies designed to foster strong local community ties to those based on need have resulted in a disaffected white working class locked in conflict with the expanding Bangladeshi population over scarce material resources.

However, as John Marriott noted in a review of the book, the authors fail to see the central weakness of the Willmott and Young – its mythical construction of a local working class community. They are unable:

> to distance themselves from the cosy mythology of Family and Kinship. This earlier study, the product of the moment of left culturalism in the late 1950s, nostalgically celebrated a working class community whose very existence was under threat from slum clearance schemes … Popular and critical accounts of working-class life in the twentieth century have vigorously challenged the sorts of myths constructed by left culturalism which were so effectively promoted by Wilmott and Young. Few still accept the cosy images of extended family life (Marriott, 2006).

Marriott also points to the authors' failure to explain how the issue of housing became racialised. Important clues are provided by local residents' views about Bangladeshi 'alien' habits, as well as the history of using stereotypes to classify migrants, working class patriotic traditions and the influence of imperialism.

> None of these fragments, however, is brought into a coherent narrative explaining the contingent and mobile nature of racist sentiment. Thus, while seeming to accept the

implicit racism of working-class East Londoners, the authors' use of history fails to reveal precisely how it was linked to distinct senses of national and local identity thrown into crisis by the post war settlement in their manor of previously colonized peoples (ibid.; see also Wemyss, 2009).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the ways in which insiders and outsiders, community and locality have been represented through different types of textual narratives and performances. These representations of people and place are informed by ideological differences which are, in turn, shaped by ethnicity, race, gender, education and class. They also reflect political struggles over the ways in which particular groups and individuals should behave in public space, as most clearly demonstrated during the Kobi Nazrul Centre meeting, in the oral history narratives and during the controversies triggered by *Brick Lane* and *The Islamist*. These ideological and political struggles not only provide an insight into the ways in which an area of London is variously imagined but how the local is linked to the national, transnational and global.

These texts, the ways in which they are performed and the local controversies often appear to have little relevance to the theme of this volume - the British Asian city, however. Their imaginings are frequently concerned with their Bangladeshi heritage, both in Britain and Bangladesh, and even more narrowly with the web of ties linking those who had migrated from rural Sylhet. Yet despite the high degree of social and economic encapsulation, which the 1991 Census revealed (see Eade, Vamplew and Peach, 1996), these texts also reveal the ways in which British Bangladeshis have engaged with British Asians and other outsiders. We have seen this engagement in the political campaigns of 1970-1971 by the first generation, the contribution to anti-racist struggles by the Kobi Nazrul centre's director, as well as the eclectic use made by young Bangladeshis of S. Asian artistic traditions and western music. The process of Islamisation has also played its part. In its manifold forms it has encouraged young Bangladeshis, in particular, to look beyond ethnic boundaries towards a global *ummah*, which includes Muslims from other areas of the Indian sub-continent.

So two processes appear to be at work. Tight social networks, the pressures of life within London's poor neighbourhoods and the limited opportunities for upward social mobility are encouraging Bangladeshis to remain behind the boundary of a highly encapsulated community. Everyday life is still dominated by ethnic ties and the need to survive within an extremely diverse global city. At the same time those involved in representing 'their community' to other Bangladeshis and to outsiders have long been involved in networks and alliances, which extend beyond their locality to other localities across London and Britain and to other countries especially Bangladesh. The process of writing inevitably entails a reflexive move where taken-for-granted beliefs and practices are contemplated at distance and the writer begins to compare the world of insiders with alternatives available beyond the 'community'. In so doing they engage not just with the white majority but with those, who are also drawing on South Asian traditions and reinventing them in British urban conditions.

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