



Diasporas,
migration
& identities



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Research Council



**From Diasporas to Multi-Locality:
Writing British Asian Cities**

www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities

Working Paper

WBAC 010

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3 March 2010

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**Writing British Asian Women: from *purdah* and the problematic private sphere to
new forms of public engagement and cultural production**

Emma Tomalin, March 2010

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Introduction

While the history of the South Asian presence in Britain has been captured in different *genres* of writing - including academic studies (mainly by sociologists and anthropologists), policy literature (from local and national bodies), oral history, creative writing and journalism - such accounts have been criticized for promoting gendered silences, stereotypes and the invisibility of women. The emergence of a gender lens in academic research since the 1960s has encouraged reflection upon the ways in which women's experiences of and roles within various historical, political, social or economic processes have at times been both marginalized and distorted. This is no less true for thinking about the place of women in various diasporas and the sociologist Avtar Brah, in her path breaking study *Cartographies of Diaspora*, draws attention to the intersection of a range of factors upon shaping 'diaspora space' (1996), including gender, class, racism and sexuality. A gender focus did not emerge that strongly within the Writing British Asian Cities project, either in terms of the workshop themes, ensuing discussions and participation, or in terms of its overall method (i.e. the workshop model is not necessarily the most appropriate way to access and present writing by and about women). However, the workshop events did open up some interesting places from which to pursue questions of gender and, where relevant, this paper punctuates its discussion with reference to vignettes from the project workshops. Moreover, the focus within the project on cities as localities that shape 'diaspora space' differently, has consequences for the questions that

we might ask about the extent to which the literature on British Asian diasporas 'writes gender' differently from city to city.

In this chapter I reflect upon how women's experiences have been *written* (or remain *unwritten*) in accounts of British Asian diasporas. In particular, I draw attention to two dominant social scientific discourses that have emerged in response to thinking about the representation of women in writings about South Asian diasporas in the UK. First, it is argued that women's voices are often invisible or less visible in accounts of migration, settlement and community formation, as well as in more recent discussions of multiculturalism and racism, and the shift from a focus on ethnicity to religion (Hussain 2005; Sahgal and Yural-Davis 1992). The processes impacting upon and within migrant communities and families as they settle and establish relationships with the state and society are 'gendered' (i.e. they affect and are affected by women and men in different ways) and this, it is argued, has often been underplayed or overlooked. While some of the earlier anthropological accounts of migration and settlement, dating from the 1970s, do attempt to document both men and women's diasporic experience, and a careful examination of this material is important in understanding the gendered nature of this incipient diasporic space, overall women's voices have been marginalized. There is a need, therefore, to write women back into a masculinist historical record (e.g. this is the aim of oral history projects that target women, amongst other marginalized groups).

The second discourse highlights that even when women are written back into the historical record, they are still sometimes invisible since there is a tendency to employ colonialist narratives that essentialize women as passive victims of their culture who need rescuing. This position, which has emerged from within post-colonial feminism, also raises tricky questions concerning 'insider/outsider' approaches to writing about South

Asian women and is part of a broader critique from within postmodern/postcolonial thinking that is wary of earlier traditions of ethnography in anthropology from the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, anthropological texts, such as *Desh Pardesh: the South Asian Experience in Britain* (Roger Ballard's 1994 edited collection of ethnographic studies of British Asian diasporic life, largely written by white academics), have been taken to task in the more recent collection of essays by mainly British Asian scholars, *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain* (Ali, Kalra and Sayyid 2006), for generating knowledge about South Asians in Britain that rely on a 'conceptual vocabulary borrowed from the legacy of Indology and its allied disciplines' (Sayyid 2006: 2). This theme is taken up with respect to gender in the edited book *South Asian Women in the Diaspora* (Puwar and Raghuram 2003), which draws upon material presented at a conference that restricted participation to women of South Asian descent. Here, Puwar argues that even when ethnographers aim to locate their 'narrations outside the fixtures of previous taxonomies' and 'attempt to generate and present their research in the most dialogic and ethical terms possible, these mechanisms do not guarantee that the hitherto muted subaltern subjects can speak, in the sense of being heard' (2003: 32). While these critiques raise issues about ethnocentrism that ought to concern us, the logical end point of this debate - that ethnographies of diasporas are most suitably undertaken by 'insiders' as the 'outsider' cannot help but reinforce certain colonialist paradigms – is arguably overextended. Some ethnography may well be guilty of colonialist gestures but this does not mean that we should reject it as a genre, and instead we should look towards ways that a postcolonial critique – which is sensitive to issues of power, gender, race, history or class – can inform more nuanced ways of engaging ethnographically.ⁱ

In this chapter my aim is to look more closely at these social scientific critiques of the representation of women in different genres of literature that deal with post-war South

Asian diasporic experience in the UK. For this purpose, it is useful to look at the changing dynamics and processes of diasporas of South Asians in the UK from the 1950s to the current day in terms of four stages, which have brought about particular themes or styles in the written accounts: 1) migration, settlement and community formation (reflected in ethnographic writing mainly from the 1970s and 80s, but charting processes from the 1950s); 2) women's political organizing and activism from the late 1970s-current, giving rise to social science studies that capture the increasing visibility of British Asian women in the public sphere and political realm; 3) the framing of women by state/public discourses, as responded to by women's groups and social scientists, particularly since the 1989 'Rushdie affair'ⁱⁱ; and 4) women's role in transnational cultural production and consumption, documented in cultural studies literature on identity formation since the 1990s. In discussing a selection of literature from within each of these four stages I suggest that a closer look at the written material in fact reveals a more varied account that avoids a simplistic polarization in terms of the two discourses outlined above. However, in selecting literature to focus on, I have largely restricted my survey to social science studies: my analysis and argument is filtered through a social science lens. On the one hand, I am interested in how the social sciences have discussed the representation of women in the different genres of literature (e.g. policy, journalism, creative writing and academic) and, on the other hand, in how social scientists have themselves approached the issue of women in British Asian diasporas (e.g. ethnographic accounts of migration or studies on women's activism).

Migration, settlement and community formation

Amina, Amjad's wife...told me that initially she did not believe the story spread by villagers...that Amjad had married an English girl. Eventually, however, this was

confirmed in a letter from Amjad's brother who was living in London at the time. Amina then resolved to go to England herself...She brought her children with her to Oxford and lived for almost a year in the same house as the English wife, who by then also had a child. But eventually the English wife left and the child remained with Amina...although Amjad now expresses shame for his 'misdemeanour', and has strict attitudes towards the upbringing of his daughters, Amina feels that she cannot entirely trust him and is reluctant to go back to Pakistan and leave her husband in England (Shaw 1988: 46-47).

For most South Asian communities in Britain the history of women's migration begins in the 1970s, although male family members had migrated earlier. The above quotation from Alison Shaw's ethnography, *A Pakistani Community in Britain*, reveals that women and men often had different reasons for 'family reunion'. Whereas some of her male informants emphasized that in bringing their families to Britain they could 'continue the chain of male wage earners' through their sons (Shaw 1994: 42) or benefit from superior educational and health facilities compared to back home, women often alluded to concerns over safeguarding male fidelity.

Part of telling the story of migration, settlement and community formation from women's perspective is to draw attention to the distinct role that women played in these processes. In particular, their role in community formation has been noted within the literature (Shaw 1988; Bhachu 1985; Ballard 1994) as well as within the meetings of the Writing British Asian Cities project. At the introductory session to the Leicester event this was stressed by Karen Chauhan from the Peepul Centre, which hosted the event and whose board today comprises predominantly Asian women. She explained how the centre had been pioneered by the *Belgrave Baheno Women's Organisation*, founded in 1982 and now with

a membership of over 5000 women. At the final session that day we heard Nayana Whittaker speak about the history of Indian dance in Leicester (before entertaining us with a demonstration), drawing attention to the role that women played in identity and community formation through performing dances at Hindu festivals such as Navaratri.

While there are ethnographic studies that demonstrate a gender difference with respect to migration, settlement and community formation, ethnography as a genre has been criticized (from a postcolonial and feminist perspective) for presenting descriptive accounts that serve to normalize women's role in the 'problematic private sphere' without their own agency to critique and transform timeless networks of family and kinship (Westwood and Bhachu 1988; Ahmad 2006). Although Ballard's *Desh Pardesh* (1994), for instance, does not engage with gender analysis, we do find several chapters where women appear as a focus: Alison Shaw's *The Pakistani Community in Oxford*; Shrikala Warriar's *Gujarati Prajapatis in London: family roles and sociability networks* and Katy Gardner and Abdus Shukur on *The Changing Identities of British Bengalis*. These are straightforward anthropological accounts of women's lives in the context of the familiar indological categories of family, kinship and caste (Sayyid 2006). While women are more likely to be found in the private sphere, from a postcolonial feminist perspective texts of this type have been criticized for emphasizing women's position as wives and mothers, and ignoring their role in the economy and wider society. The 'problematic private sphere' becomes the place where policy makers and the media 'expect' to find women confined and which shapes and constrains their representations of British Asian women.

One study that specifically takes up this issue of the value and limits of ethnography is Sallie Westwood and Parminder Bhachu's *Enterprising Women: Ethnicity, economy and gender relations* (1988). The essays in this volume aim to avoid so-called 'naïve

culturalist accounts' (1988: 11), but do consider that ethnography and thick description have a role to play:

Anthropology has long striven for theoretical complexity, but it has remained committed to a methodology and an account of social forms which is grounded in the substantive lives of people. We believe that it is important for feminism to take note of ethnographic materials and to integrate these within current discourse so as to move the debates forward. Ethnography is, therefore, a positive tool in our struggle against the racism of British society and a means whereby insiders' accounts can construct both the detail and the parameters in which minority cultures and lives will be understood, academically and more generally (1988: 13).

While there is a current within ethnographic studies of the South Asian diaspora in the UK that romanticizes and reproduces orientalist categories, careful analysis of a range of anthropological studies on diaspora reveals that the private sphere is not consistently presented as a site of repression but also as somewhere where women can exert agency, albeit within the confines of patriarchal constraints (Parrenas 2001). Moreover, gender relations within the family are not necessarily the same across all British Asian communities. Ethnographic accounts that are rooted in different British Asian locations reveal that there are distinctive dynamics amongst, for instance, Asian migrants from Kashmir, the Punjab, Gujerat and Bengal, as well as different groups from East Africa, and that gender is configured differently within and between these diasporic spaces, according to the interaction of a range of factors including religion/culture, place of origin and class/caste (Bhachu 1985; Shaw 1988; Ballard 1990). Verity Saifullah Khan, one of the earliest anthropologists to document the processes of migration, settlement and community formation in the UK, draws attention to the heterogeneity of the Pakistani

diaspora in the UK, showing that although Pakistani customs shape Mirpuri life in Bradford that migration alters custom and tradition in key ways. For instance, Mirpuri women in Bradford are expected to follow stricter *purdah* (seclusion) in Britain than in their home village (1977: 77; 1976; see also Ballard 1990).

Two studies are interesting to compare here: Parminder Bhachu's (1985) *Twice Migrants* and Alison Shaw's (1988) *A Pakistani Community in Britain*. Both point to ways in which women cannot be constructed as victims of a 'paternalistic South Asian culture', but quite diverse scenarios are described relating to differences between the two communities in terms of material and cultural capital, including different migration patterns, religious and cultural practices, educational and job status prior to migration, and marriage practices. Bhachu's 'twice migrants'ⁱⁱⁱ are Ramgarhia Sikhs from Kenya and one of the distinct features of their migratory pattern was that they lacked of a 'myth of return' (1985: 1).^{iv} Coming to London from the late 1960s onwards, they arrived in family units, which meant that they could marry within Sikh communities in Britain. Moreover, this migrant Asian workforce was typically prosperous and educated, including skilled and white-collar male workers who spoke fluent English. Women, however, had also been taking up paid employment in East Africa as 'clerks, secretaries, teachers, and nurses' (1985: 27), matching the profile of occupations amongst younger Sikh women who had migrated to London. Older women, by contrast, who were more likely to have not been working in East Africa, tended to find work in factories. According to Bhachu:

East African Sikh women (or indeed Sikh women in general) have a considerable degree of freedom compared with Muslim and non wage-earning women, who are more homebound. This was clear from the recent marches to the Indian High Commission, protesting against the military invasion of the Golden Temple in June

1984. The British media indeed focussed on the huge and vociferous presence of the women. Nor is there any *purdah* system, nor any clear-cut segregation of the two sexes. Men and women talk quite freely to each other in public...Both young men and women are expected to become educated and have successful careers in Britain while maintaining the Sikh symbols and keeping an active interest in the Sikh religion (1985: 49).

Bhachu is herself an East African 'twice migrant' from Tanzania and as an 'insider' ethnographer writing in the 1980s was a rarity in a field dominated by white academics. Elsewhere she similarly argues that men and women are treated more equally by Sikh culture and religion than they are in the name of Islam (1988) and, while we might wonder if the reasons for this can be traced back to religio-cultural influences, ongoing work by the Sikhism scholar Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, suggests a positive correlation between the Sikh religion, gender roles and women's participation in public life (1993).

By contrast, Shaw's Punjabis and Mirpuris in Oxford had different reasons for migration, with men coming alone since the 1950s, to overcrowded houses lacking basic amenities and crammed with other Pakistani men, to earn money to send back home and, in contrast to the Ramgarhia Sikhs, they embodied a strong 'myth of return'. Marriage partners were also more likely to come from Pakistan, which meant that there has been an ongoing migration of non-English speaking spouses (mainly female). Women and their children arrived in Oxford from 1964,^v later than the men, and the 'upbeat' characterization of the liberated wage earning Sikh women can be contrasted with Shaw's depiction of Muslim women in Oxford: 'Pakistani women are depressed and isolated in Britain, being formally subordinate to men and confined to the home and

childcare within their own community, and being the victims of racism within British society' (1988: 4).

She does argue, however, that the situation is more complex than this, and that there is a difference between the 'outside' picture of their lives and the 'inside' picture (to which she as an ethnographer has access, although remaining an 'outsider' to the actual community). In certain respects, she suggests, women's roles have been strengthened through migration rather than weakened since 'it is largely women who are responsible for the distinctive structure and social life of the community today; it is in this that their power lies' (1988: 5). They are the reproducers of community identity, which includes protecting their families from western culture. Thus, if we compare these two accounts, for the Sikh women portrayed by Bhachu, coming to Britain has furthered their retreat from the private sphere and complete dependency on family and husband, whereas for Shaw's Pakistani women, migration has entrenched their role in the joint family (although this ought not to be seen as 'problematic' *per se*). Shaw updated her book in the year 2000, noting that over time women have moved out of the home more and although many more women are in paid employment, there is still not equality here with men. However, she stresses 'there is no simple correlation between cultural attitudes and experiences of paid work; pragmatic considerations, family structure, the extent of a woman's childcare commitments and local work opportunities all play a part in shaping 'what happens'' (Shaw 2000: 64; Brah 1996: 70; Brah 1993).

This brief review of some of the literature on migration, settlement and community formation, and the way that it deals with women's gendered experiences, has highlighted the obvious but central point that there is not one 'British Asian diaspora', an important contribution of ethnography in face of often essentializing and homogenizing domestic

policy and media gloss. In particular, a focus on the local dynamics of particular cities and towns forces us to unpack the notion of 'British-Asian' and to speak of specific, complex diasporas in the plural but also to recognize that gender relations and gendered identities are configured differently within different communities. In the next section of this chapter new processes and dynamics come into play with respect to the politicization of South Asian diasporas in the UK. Khan's (1977) reflections on her research on Mirpuris in Bradford suggests in that in the 1970s most Mirpuris were not interested in political organizing but were focused on day-to-day survival. However, by the late 1970s we find that a much stronger political focus had developed and people were engaging in labour disputes, antiracism campaigns and public critique of the intersection of these with gender concerns. The prominence of women in these campaigns has been strongly noted in the academic and activist literature. Brah, for instance, a woman academic and founding member of the *Southall Black Sisters* collective in 1979 (Southall Black Sisters 1989) depicts women's place in the labour market, the home and education as distinctly coloured by 'patriarchal racism' (1996). However, in stark contrast to narratives around *purdah* and women's exclusion from the public sphere, she writes:

I argue against European orientalist ideologies which construct Asian women as passive. Instead...women of Asian origin in Britain are actively setting their own agendas, challenging their specific oppressions in their own ways, and marking new cultural and political trajectories (Brah 1996: 69).

Women's political organizing and activism

While from the late 1970s there was an increased media interest in the political activism of Asian young people, according to Brah 'these reports focused almost entirely on young

men' (1996: 44). These male groups came to be seen as the only Asian 'youth groups' which ignored the fact that groups such as the *Bradford Black* collective included female participants, as did the better-known all women *Southall Black Sisters*, formed in 1979. She writes that:

Significantly, young women organized on the basis of their position as women rather than as 'youth'... These women's groups addressed patriarchal issues simultaneously with those of class and racism, and in the process found themselves interrogating the gender politics of the male-dominated youth movements and 'Left Groups', as much as the ethnocentrism and 'race' politics of white feminist groups (1996: 44).

At the Manchester meeting of the British Asian Cities project, sociologist Anandi Ramamurthy took up this theme in a discussion of her work on the 'Asian Youth Movement' (AYM) of the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a larger city, which had attracted migration from a more diverse group of women from middle class, educated urban families, Manchester was the only British location where the AYM involved women in key positions and where a women's wing eventually emerged (Ramamurthy 2008). In conducting interviews with AYM members, her research has asked women about the nature of their participation but reveals a dearth of women's narratives, at least partially because women were often reluctant to speak about their experiences, feeling that they would have 'nothing to add'. This suggests that women themselves may not realize that they have a different yet important story to tell, and instead allow their experiences to be subsumed by the male version of events.

Despite women's increased political mobilization since the 1970s, we continue to find the critique that women's activism has been overlooked more recently. For instance, following the 2001 riots in Bradford, spurred by Asian male youths, the media and community bodies emphasized the male response to the uprisings while ignoring women's voices. The work of Marie Macey has been notably useful here, in looking at the ways in which the sort of male violence that was seen in Bradford during the riots can be linked to issues of religion, class and gender (1999a; 1999b; 2002; 2007). However, as a 2001 *Guardian* newspaper article asks: 'the troubles in Bradford have been seen as Asian men reacting with traditional male aggression to racism. But where are the voices of the women who, in reality, are the backbone of the community - and are slowly beginning to change it?' (Carter 2001). An earlier article by Burlet and Reid (1998), following the 1996 riot/uprising in Bradford, similarly draws attention to the role that women played in the aftermath and the ways in which this was overlooked by the media and community leaders.

Echoing these concerns are a number of key academic texts that have attempted to bring the politicization of British Asian women to the fore. In *Finding a Voice: Asian women in Britain* (1978), Amrit Wilson, a social scientist and activist, tells women's stories of migration and settlement, drawing attention to their sense of isolation, culture shock and homesickness; the dynamics of the family, often oppressive and restrictive; and experiences of employment, including participation in labour disputes. Rather than ethnography, her methodological approach is akin to life history interviews where she presents lengthy passages that are in the women's own words. While this book was radical in bringing to the fore aspects of British Asian women's lives that had been hitherto hidden, it has been criticized for lacking 'any explicit political and economic framework' (Paramar 1982: 252). In her chapter, *Gender, race and class: Asian women in*

resistance, in the edited volume *The Empire Strikes Back: race and racism in 70s Britain*, a key cultural studies text that was influential in shaping later postcolonial writings on diaspora, Pratibah Parmar writes that:

Asian women have been at the forefront of numerous industrial, political and social struggles over the last decade. They have also been subjected to the full oppressive force of immigration legislation and institutional racism at all levels of British society. Yet, existing literature on black people in Britain has tended to ignore gender differences or to look at them through ethnocentric and pathological categories. With the exception of a few recent studies, there have been no serious attempts to analyse the role of women in the processes of migration and settlement, let alone the struggles against racism which have characterized the everyday lives of West Indian and Asia people in Britain (Parmar 1982: 236).

Kenyan-born Parmar was one of the co-editors of *The Empire Strikes Back* and is today a film-maker, writer and activist living in Britain. She aims to go beyond the ethnographic focus on women as products of their culture (the 'ethnicity school') and instead to look at their status in terms of the institutional power relations and class structures that oppress them. Her Marxist influenced analysis draws attention to migrant women as a cheap source of labour and their role as providers of free domestic reproductive labour (in both India and the UK) that supports their husbands and sons, as well as the host society. She engages with the rhetoric of post-colonial anti-ethnography in criticizing white anthropologists, such as Verity Saifullah Khan, for stereotyping British Asian women as 'passive, static, and incapable of change' (1982: 250; see Khan 1976). While a careful reading of Khan's work, as well as other ethnographies, reveals a more varied account of women's agency, with texts such as Parmar's we do find a new body of

academic literature emerging that marks a break with the earlier ethnographic material that is largely focused on the family and is undertaken by white academics. This literature is concerned with the politicization of British Asian women and is itself polemical and controversial as it grapples with the intersection between race, gender and colonialism.

Labour disputes have received particular attention in this literature, as since the 1960s there have been a number of strikes involving Asian workers and women have been at the forefront of many of these (Brah 1996: 72). These strikes have concerned low wages and poor working conditions. The key examples include the Imperial Typewriters strike 1974 in Leicester, involving workers mainly from Uganda (Parmar 1982: 264; Wilson 1978: 56); the Grunwick (film processing firm) strike 1976-78 in London, which was mainly led by East African twice migrant women from Tanzania and Uganda (Parmar 1982: 260, 266; Wilson 1978: 60 ff); the Chix sweet factory in Slough 1980 (Parmar 1982: 267); and Fitters in north London, 1979 (Brah 1996: 72). More recently, Asian women were at the forefront of the 2005 dispute at Gate Gourmet (a food preparation plant providing airline meals to Heathrow airport) and a comparison of this with the earlier Grunwick protest has formed the subject of a research project and exhibition: *Subverting Stereotypes: Asian Women's Political Activism* (Pearson, Anitha and McDowell 2009; Manzoor 2010). Whereas the Grunwick protest received a high level of media attention, albeit through stereotypes of the fragile yet defiant Asian woman, the more recent Gate Gourmet strike has been the subject of few reports. In this research, Pearson et al. (2009) draw attention to the way that representations of diasporic women continue to focus on their place within the family and community, typically essentializing them in terms of their religio-cultural traditions, and that much of the current literature about diasporic identity ignores women's role in the workplace.

In addition to workplace activism, as Parmar notes, 'Asian women have... also been involved in struggles and campaigns against other forms of oppression and repression' (1982: 69). Often alongside Afro-Caribbean and white women, Asian women were involved in establishing organizations such as the *Brent Women's Refuge* (est. 1981; Sahgal 1992), the *An-nisa Society* (a Muslim women's organization est. in 1985) and *Women Against Fundamentalism* (est. 1989), as well as *Southall Black Sisters*. In the final chapter of her recent study, *Dreams, Questions and Struggles* (2006), Amrit Wilson looks back over women's organizing in the South Asian diaspora and begins by narrating an event that took place in London in March 2003 where 25 Asian women's groups came together to launch Asian Women Unite (AWU) (2006: 159). The concerns of the group would include: 'custody law, employment, education, mental health, the war on Iraq, the rise of right wing religious groups in South Asia and the funding of women's groups in Britain' (2006: 176). One feature of this activism, as it has developed, has been a focus on international and transnational linkages. On the one hand, rather than considering issues affecting women in Britain as isolated consequences of 'patriarchal racism', there are attempts to organize across national boundaries and to look for common patterns and linkages. On the other hand, many British Asian women feel a responsibility to help others, (particularly women and children) who they consider to be disadvantaged in other parts of the world, and have set up or support charitable organizations, or take part in international campaigns. Werbner, for instance, discusses al-Masoom, a Muslim charity in Manchester run by educated, urban, Panjabi women since 1990, which, despite strong resistance from male community members, has helped the poor in Pakistan and Bosnia, 'motivated by the Islamic notion of *khidmas* and *sadaqa* – selfless communal work and charitable giving' (1996: 59). More recently, an example of international women-led political activism can be seen in the high profile support of the Birmingham City Councillor Salma Yaqoob, affiliated to the Respect Party, for the 'Stop the War Coalition'.^{vi} Yaqoob

was a participant at the Writing British Asian Cities project workshop in Birmingham and spoke about how her husband had been criticized from within the ranks of her community when she started working with Respect: 'Have you got no shame with your wife working with the *kuffar* (unbelievers)'. However, she also explained how the anti-war demos had brought a 'Bhaji on the Beach like confidence to women' that helped them withstand negative community opinion.

Alongside the increasing visibility of women's political organizing and activism since the 1970s, we also find attention in the literature to the politicization of women by state/public discourses that essentialize British Asian women as products of their culture and religion. Interestingly, this tendency seems to have intensified with a global rise in 'religious fundamentalism'. Moreover, these discourses typically take Islam as a proxy for South Asian culture, thereby ignoring other religious traditions (i.e. Hinduism and Sikhism), when discussing women's rights and their place in the family. Since the late 1980s, but gaining pace in the 1990s, there has been a shift from discourses around race and ethnicity to discourses about religion, and the state and media have played a key role in reinforcing this (McLoughlin in this volume). These essentialisms are something that many of the organizations discussed above have struggled against, and in particular attention has been focused upon three areas: forced marriage, Muslim schools and veiling.

Responses to the framing of women by state/public discourses

The widespread fallacy that all arranged marriages are forced marriages – the gateway to a life of misery – is reinforced by the British media, which sensationalize and over-simplify exceptional cases of suffering, conflict and

tragedy... This is one of many areas in which well-informed and responsible media reporting could do more than all the commissions, committees and councils of the RRI [race relations industry] to improve race relations in Britain (Murphy 1987: 18).

The well known travelogue about Manningham/Bradford and Handsworth/ Birmingham, *Tales from Two Cities* (1987), written by the Irish travel writer Dervla Murphy, takes up a discussion of marriage and gender discrimination in a Muslim community through the story of Jahan and Naseem. They had met in Bradford, fallen in love and married against their parents' wishes, therefore counterpoising the view that arranged/forced marriage is the only option. In the above quotation, Murphy highlights the conflation of arranged and forced marriage in public discourse (Samad and Eade 2003; Pichler 2007; Wilson 2007; Ahmad 2006). While 'blatantly forced marriages are rare' (Murphy 1984: 17) they have come to be seen as representative of British Asian marriages with the effect of tainting and creating suspicion around the more common and diverse practice of 'arranged marriage'. Murphy portrays Naseem and Jahan as 'victim-pioneers': victims of a multi-cultural situation that is testing their relationship to the limit, yet pioneers for engaging in a 'defiant gesture of 'self-determination' that is redefining the boundaries of their community (1984:18). It is notable that Murphy pretty much chooses to open her story with this vignette, it begins on page 18, and she uses it to foreground a discussion of traditions of marriage within the Mirpuri community and the ways in which the British state and the media frame them. Written against the backdrop of 1980s racial tensions in Bradford, Murphy makes no apologies for the polemical edge to her work. In fact it seems to be intrinsic to her particular 'ethnographic' style, which she considers to be neither academic nor journalistic. Not affiliated to any religion, political party or race relations organization, she aims to use her position as ethnographer to tell us about the

lives of the people she encounters in Birmingham and Bradford but also to provoke controversy in exposing 'hypocrisy – wherever she detects it' (inside cover, 1984).

In particular, she draws attention here to the hypocrisy inherent within certain British state and media discourses that, on the one hand, essentialize all Muslim marriage practices as *coerced* yet, on the other hand, typically see these as sacrosanct traditions that cannot be interfered with because they are part and parcel of another group's religion and culture (1984: 24). Murphy's argument forms part of a broader critical approach, where it is noted that the protection of 'group rights', from a misplaced and naïve cultural relativity, has been particularly disastrous for women and girls when they face problems such as forced marriage. To provide an example, a British Asian woman, Jasvinder Sanghera, who herself was subject to a 'forced marriage' and ran away from her family at sixteen years to avoid it, has set up an advocacy group for girls and women – *Karma Nirvana* – and has recently published a book – *Daughter's of Shame* (2009), charting her experience and that of other women in a similar situation. One of her concerns is that schools in British towns and cities seem to ignore the issue of girls being forced into marriages against their wills - hundreds of girls are reported 'missing' from UK schools each year – and that they are reluctant to do much for fear of upsetting cultural sensitivities. Thus, British Asian girls, who are being subjected to what is essentially child abuse, are not afforded the same rights and treatment as other young girls. Under the banner of multiculturalism, the state and policy makers have found it difficult to engage with the issue of gender within minority communities as it is played out within the private space of the 'community' and the 'family' (Okin 1999; Macey and Beckett 2001). Like many other commentators, Murphy argues that we need to 'move this controversy from the area of religion and race to the area of human rights' (1987: 24; see Sahgal and Yural-Davis 1992: 8).

This focus on religion, particularly Islam, and the way that it is perceived to shape women's identities and roles, which forms a key part of Murphy's opening narrative, has also been a strong theme in the broader activist and academic literature concerned with the representation of women in multiculturalist discourses in Britain. A key text here is *Refusing Holy Orders: women and fundamentalism in Britain*, edited by Gita Sahgal and Nira Yural-Davis (1992). Gita Sahgal is currently the head of the Gender Unit at Amnesty International but is also an activist, broadcaster and writer, who has also been an active member of *Women Against Fundamentalism* and the *Southall Black Sisters*, organizations concerned with resisting and attempting to reshape essentially 'colonialist' state narratives, which have 'retained and reinvented aspects of religious law governing family and property matters' (1992: 167). She writes that this has had an impact upon how the state deals with British Asian women:

Grappling with unfamiliar social groups meant that policy makers in education or the social services made very reductive choices about the attributes of particular minority group. A complex web of political, social and cultural considerations, which helped to form a particular identity, has often been reduced to purely religious values, emanating from a conservative opinion within the community. In this way a harassed social worker in an area like Southall, telling a young Asian Woman that she should conform to her family's desire to marry her off, may quite unwittingly be following in the footsteps of some colonial forebear (Sahgal 1992: 167-168).

Sahgal presents an extreme example, and one might wonder whether it is presented for its rhetorical quality rather than actually representing how social workers routinely behave. Nonetheless, it ought to also be seen within the context of a broader

argument within the book that any reduction of women's identities to 'religious values' is particularly worrying considering the rapid rise of fundamentalist religious movements across the globe over recent decades. The volume was written in the wake of the 'Rushdie Affair' and the formation of *Women against Fundamentalism* (WAF), set up 1989. While the main area of concern is 'religious fundamentalism' there have been criticisms that there is a tendency here to see all Islam as fundamentalist, and that the position expressed by WAF, and indeed within *Refusing Holy Orders*, is not only secularist *but also* anti-Islamic (Modood 1995; Connolly 1995). In a debate that took place in the pages of the WAF journal, WAF rejected Modood's claim (2005) that it was anti-Islamic, instead stressing that it argues for a secular state as a 'pre-condition, among many others, of a pluralist and egalitarian future' (Connolly 1995: 4) and that it 'will not be silenced by attempts to distort our position as 'anti-Islamic'' (1995:3).

Thus, for WAF this was not a debate about whether particular religions are a good or bad thing, but that *all* religions should be kept separate from the public sphere and political realm. Following this perspective, one of the key campaigns that engaged WAF was countering calls for single sex schools within the Muslim community, an agenda that they shared with the British state. Saeeda Khanum, in her article *Education and the Muslim Girl* (in *Refusing Holy Orders*), writes that the promotion of single sex education for girls was one response to the 'Honeyford affair', when in 1983-4 Bradford headmaster Ray Honeyford published a series of racist articles.^{vii} Khanum makes an explicit link between the deepening 'siege mentality of Bradford's Muslim community' (1992: 130) following this 'crisis' and styles of education typically favoured by religious fundamentalists where 'the education of Muslim girls has less to do with schooling than with the exercise of control by Muslim men over the lives of women in the family and wider community' (1992: 130). McLoughlin, however, is critical of Khanum for homogenizing Islam and generalizing

'about the ends to which Muslims might employ discourses of Islam' (1998a: 456). In his study of the campaign by the 'Bradford Muslim Girl's Community School' to obtain state funding in the early 1990s, he (1998a) draws attention to the ways in which the head mistress and school governors explicitly aimed to counter constructions of Islam as 'separatist' and 'fundamentalist' (Haw 1998). While he suggests that a more careful analysis reveals that the school was promoted 'as a transformative space within 'the Muslim community' that had been opened up for girls who might otherwise have been denied an education' (1998a: 451), the state eventually refused funding. The main reason given was that the school's buildings did not meet health and safety standards, but this decision also attracted claims that it had been influenced by anti-Islamic voices in the government and by broader public discourses that Muslims in Britain are inherently separatist and that single sex schools are oppressive for girls. This is not to say that 'Islamic fundamentalists' do not separate girls from society as a means of control, but the hegemony of these public discourses means that other views about gender and Islam are obscured (McLoughlin 1998a).

A further example of the ubiquitous appeal of essentialist discourses that reduce British Asian women to totalizing religious traditions that uniformly restrict their rights, is found in attitudes towards the veil and *pardah*. Brah picks up on the ways in which *opposing* masculinist discourses have adopted the image of the Muslim veiled woman. On the one hand, we find claims for war in Afghanistan on the basis of freeing (or unveiling) the veiled woman, yet, on the other hand, the veiled woman is an icon mobilized amongst some males in British Muslim communities, as a symbol of an oppositional identity-based culture, politics and religion (Brah 2006, Ahmed 1992; Yegenoglu 2002; Viner 2002). While traditions of veiling and *pardah* are only associated with some Muslim communities (and indeed within other religious groups), they have come to more broadly reflect the

way that the British state and the media represent Asian women as oppressed and hidden from view. For instance, McLoughlin and others have been critical of the notion that 'secluded women' are a major factor in the emergence of an Asian underclass in Britain, arguing instead that Asian women's lack of access to the work place cannot be wholly accounted for by notions of *pardah*, but also that when women wear the veil it has a range of meanings (1988b; Shaw 2000; Brah 1996; 1993). A number of the chapters in *Refusing Holy Orders* draw attention to the fact that in wearing the veil, some Muslim women may be allowed greater freedom to participate in society (Saghal and Yural-Davis 1992: 9; Ali 1992). Thus, whilst WAF and *Refusing Holy Orders* have been criticized for not distinguishing different types of Islam from extreme fundamentalist manifestations (e.g. in the debate over single sex schools), here we find a greater accommodation of the view that Islam can take different forms. To pursue empowerment within an Islamic framework can be thought of as a form of 'Islamist feminism' (Ali 1992: 121), a strategic move whereby women do not have to reject their culture and traditions to pursue equal opportunities (Afshar 2008; Ahmed 1992). Moreover, the growing popularity of so-called *hijabi* fashion, big business particularly across Asia and the Middle East, refigures the veil as a sartorial choice worn by women as a fashion statement.

It is this notion of agency and strategy that also shapes the discussion in the final section of this chapter, taking us beyond texts that deal with earlier shifts to female political and social activism, and the negotiation of cultural traditions, to literature that explores women's participation in the production and consumption of 'new cultural forms and diasporic spaces' (Bhachu 1995: 239-240). *Dis-orienting Rhythms: the politics of the new Asian dance music* (Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma 1996), a key cultural studies text that marks the emergence of 'Asian Kool' (Huq 1996) through an examination of the rise in the broad appeal of Asian dance music amongst second and third generation British

Asians, is important here in depicting British Asians as both cultural producers and consumers. While the ethnographic studies of the 1980s do discuss how first generation migrant women's access to money through the labour market resulted in transformations in cultural practices (Bhachu (1985), for instance, writes about shifts in dowry practices and the increased ability of women to purchase dowry gifts), the 'cultural turn' within social science disciplines since the 1960s, has given rise to a stronger focus on cultural production and consumption and how these are key markers of identity as well as symbols of social and political resistance.

Transnational cultural production and consumption

I used to watch my dad with a group of guys do dancing and stuff. That was my first real taste of Bhangra, as it were, but I wasn't really into it then. I liked the dancing but I didn't like the Asian music...It was really old-style Bhangra and you know we didn't relate to it 'cos it wasn't ours...I started listening to Lata Mangeshka at home and I thought 'this is quite funky, this is all right', and developed a real taste for it....So I used to go to...college gigs and stuff. We didn't have Bhangra then, no one used to play it, so I used to dance to Funk and Hip Hop and Breakdance...Then Bhangra slowly started coming in and some DJs started playing that at gigs...When I went to my first Bhangra concert I had to sneak out and I think I was one of four girls in a hall of about six or seven hundred guys...It was kind of like 'Well, she must be a loose woman because she's here'...I remember one guy, he looked at me and said 'it's all right 'cos she's a Sikh' 'cos he saw my kara [bracelet worn by initiated Sikhs] and I thought 'Right it's acceptable for Sikh women to go there 'cos it's Punjabi music that's playing' (Housee and Dar 1996: 82-85).

The above quotation presents extracts from an interview with the British Asian woman DJ, Radikal Sista (Ranjit Kaur). This is found in one of the chapters in *Dis-orienting Rhythms* (1996) that takes up the theme of gender, otherwise not a particular focus of the book, in its concern to highlight 'the struggle of many young women in the creation of, as well as their unrecognized, presences in and engagement with, the new dance music' (Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma 1996: 4). Three issues are particularly striking from this interview that have a bearing more broadly upon how we think about notion of a 'diasporic space' and the location of women within it. First, the quotation draws attention to the 'gender costs' for women when they engage with new cultural forms, in terms of the stereotypes and concerns invoked within their own communities. Second, it illustrates the role that British Asian women increasingly play within new forms of cultural production and consumption that build on older cultural styles while integrating them with western influences. Third, that Bhangra is not only enjoyed by Asian youth but also by white youth, who increasingly integrate Asian influences into their popular musical forms.

These three issues are also relevant to other diasporic cultural forms that have become more mainstream and visible since the 1990s. For instance, British Asian women have increasingly played a role in the production of forms of literature, film and theatre where common themes include depictions of the migration and settlement of first generation migrant women as traumatic and isolating, as well as of the tensions between 'individualism' and 'communalism' faced by women across generations (Hussain 2006: 372; Weedon 2008). In 1984 the Asian Women's Writers 'Workshop', later renamed 'Collective', was formed and subsequently published two anthologies, 'Right of Way' (1989) and 'Flaming Spirit' (1994), marking the first concerted effort to nurture and

support British Asian women writers as a distinct group. In her book *Writing Diaspora* (2005) the sociologist Yasmin Hussain describes the women portrayed in films such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) (both by the female director Gurinder Chadha), the novels *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali (made into a film in 2007) and *Anita and Me* (1996) by Meera Syal, as 'new women' who move beyond their tradition to claim their individuality (2005). However, there is a 'gender price' here for women writers, as well as the minority women they portray, since such 'feminist' films and novels can be controversial in terms of how their key messages are received and interpreted. This became particularly apparent at the Tower Hamlets event of the Writing British Asian Cities project where the novel *Brick Lane* (2003), which is set in Tower Hamlets, was criticized not least because of the way in which it has been refigured as a source of quasi-academic 'social research' by the British media. Local critics of the book were offended by the licentiousness of the main female character Nazneen, who has an affair, but also because the novel portrays their community as poor and backward. This controversy is evidenced in the public protests to prevent a film based upon the novel from being filmed in the area (see Eade in this volume; Lea and Lewis 2006). As Weedon writes this 'burden of representation' points towards 'unrealistic demands made on cultural texts, in so far as they are expected to offer true and positive images of the communities they depict' (2008: 27).

Such protests, however, were by no means an isolated reaction to 'inappropriate' cultural representations. In December 2004 a play called *Behzti* ('dishonour' in Punjabi), written by a female British Sikh Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, was eventually cancelled following protests on its opening night at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Critics objected to one of the scenes, set in a Gurdwara depicting rape, violence and murder. Over the days and weeks that followed, the protests and subsequent cancellation, prompted a caustic exchange

within the British media between those who argued for freedom of speech, especially of women to be able to expose hypocrisies in their communities, and notions that certain things in a religion should be sacrosanct.^{viii} Thus, cultural products can be a space where communities are opened up for external scrutiny and consumption by outsiders, creating a sense of unease and a desire to censor. This 'clash of cultures' is sometimes instigated and exploited as a feminist political strategy where some British Asian women are capitalizing upon the increasing visibility of Asian cultural products to expose inequality in their communities and force internal change.

New theoretical perspectives have emerged to account for this 'sharing' in the production and consumption of transnational diasporic cultural products, which challenge older conceptions of diasporas as bounded and only encompassing particular ethnic groups. Brah's theorization of 'diaspora space' has been particularly influential here, where 'diaspora space as a conceptual category is 'inhabited' not only by those who have migrated and their descendents, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous' (1996: 209). The broadening appeal of different British-Asian cultural forms, from music and fashion to literature, film and theatre provide good evidence for this concept of diaspora space. British-Asian fashion, for instance, is mega-business which not only caters for 'ethnic' customers (there is a substantial market for saris, Punjabi suits and so-called *hijabi* fashion linked into global production/consumption chains) but also draws in a wider cohort of consumers (Dwyer 2004). Parminder Bhachu's (2004) *Dangerous Designs: Asian Women's Fashion the Diaspora Economies* looks at the ways in which styles of Asian women's dress (the Punjabi Suit in particular) have shifted over time, but also at the wider social meaning that women express through their sartorial choices. It was not until the 1990s that the Punjabi suit, until then seen as 'exclusively the dress of North Indian and Pakistani immigrant women' (2004: 11), took on

a wider appeal. Previously it had been negatively coded as symbolic of 'the highly charged clothing of marginal women, of newcomers who refused to assimilate the sartorial styles of the local white Europeans' (2004: 11), but with the Banghra explosion in the 1990s, which reconnected people with their cultural roots and pride in traditional dress, young British Asian women settled upon it as the clothing of choice. In tandem with this, the 'Asianizing' of British markets meant that 'the suit is no longer an immigrant thing' (2004: 27) and with the rise of female fashion entrepreneurs (such as Geeta Rivaaz and Komal Singh) and fashion magazines (such as *Libas International*, *Asian Woman*, *Asian Bride* and *Memsahib*) British Asian fashion acquired a new status. Asian fashion became mainstream and has been adopted by high profile non-Asians, such as, Cherie Blair and Jemima Kahn (Mani 2003).

This rise in popularity of Asian culture in the West, since the 1990s, has occurred across different cultural forms and has drawn critique from some commentators that it is essentialist, exploitative and orientalist (Hutnyck 2000). Charges of exoticism are not, however, unique here and the idea that the borrowing of and mingling of cultural products amounts to cultural theft or even 'ethnocide' draws our attention to the unequal power relations that are so often present in such transactions. Nonetheless, such critiques, although seductive, fail to accommodate the ways in which minorities may also strategically employ such orientalist constructions or essentialisms in ways that are socially, politically and economically empowering (Brah 1996: 127; Spivak 1987; Fuss 1989).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how women's experiences have been *written* in accounts of British Asian diasporas in terms of competing, overlapping and shifting representations of *pardah* and the problematic private sphere, new forms of political and social organization, and participation in different modes of cultural production and consumption. For this purpose I reviewed a selection of (largely) social science literature that reflected different stages of the changing dynamics and processes of the South Asian diaspora in the UK from the 1950s to the current day: 1) migration, settlement and community formation; 2) women's political organizing and activism; 3) the framing of women by state discourses; and 4) women's role in transnational cultural production and consumption. Besides ethnographic studies, I have explored other ways that social scientists have approached the issue of women in British Asian diasporas as well as how the social sciences have discussed the representation of women in different genres of literature (e.g. policy, journalism, creative writing and academic).

Two critical discourses in particular have shaped social scientific responses to writing about South Asian women's diasporic experience: that women's voices are absent from or marginalized in diasporic accounts and that even when women are 'given' a voice it is often not their voice which is heard but that of the state, the media or male community members. The above discussion has illustrated that while these discourses present a fairly robust account of the trends and patterns in different sorts of writing about British Asian women that at times they become overextended and a careful reading of the literature reveals a more complex and nuanced account.

First, one is often given the impression that there is little or no literature dealing with women's experiences of migration, settlement and community formation, when there are examples of ethnography from the 1970s onwards, as well as women's creative writing (Weedon 2008), that do just this. There is, nonetheless, plenty more opportunity for enhancing and balancing the historical record here and considering that many first-generation British Asian immigrant women are now elderly, time is running out. Second, from a post-colonial perspective, ethnography as a genre, is considered to be dominated by white academics, and has been virtually thrown out or at the very least positioned as an activity that can only be undertaken by 'insiders'. However, the ethnographies that we have from the 1970s onwards do more work than they are often given credit for in terms of destabilizing (gendered and colonialist) power relations and pinpointing the existence of diverse identities. On the one hand, far from universally normalizing women's roles in the domestic sphere, the ethnographic tradition demonstrates that the private sphere is not uniformly a site of oppression but also of agency and resistance, albeit within certain structural constraints. On the other hand, many ethnographic accounts focus on local dynamics and force us to not only think about diasporas in the plural, an important contribution of ethnography in the face of often essentializing and homogenizing public discourses, but also to recognize that gender is configured differently at different locations. Nonetheless, the extent to which the literature on British Asian diasporas 'writes gender' differently from city to city has not been consistently explored. A thorough examination of existing literature from this perspective as well as new research that looks at the impact of locality on the creation of gender relations and identities in British Asian diasporas would be interesting directions for future study.

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ⁱ See also the work of Henrietta Moore where she argues that ‘feminist anthropology’ in particular possesses the analytical and theoretical tools to refashion the anthropological enterprise as concerned with the intersection of ‘gender, race, class, culture, history etc...’ (1988: 196).

ⁱⁱ The fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, following the publication of his *Satanic Versus* in 1988, led to women’s groups expressing their solidarity with Rushdie as a reaction to the encroaching impact of religious fundamentalisms on their lives.

ⁱⁱⁱ They are ‘twice migrant’ because as a community they had already migrated from South Asia (Punjab) to East Africa from the late nineteenth century onwards, initially to work on the construction of the Ugandan railway. Following the independence of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania from Britain, South Asians felt increasingly forced out by policies that favoured Africanization. The Sikhs that are the focus of Bhachu’s study came from Kenya since the late 1960s and were not literally forced out like the Ugandans by Idi Amin in 1972.

^{iv} Whereas the notion of returning to the motherland was a ‘powerful organisational feature’ for ‘direct migrants’ that structured their ‘attitudes and orientations towards settlement in the UK’ (Bhachu 1995: 3), ‘twice migrants’ by contrast have only weak ties with South Asia and the socio-political situation in East Africa prohibited them from returning there.

^v They came from 1964 onwards, following the implementation of stricter immigration controls in 1962. After 1962 it was more difficult for single men to migrate but families could join them (Shaw 1988: 45).

^{vi} The ‘Stop the War Coalition’ (est. September 21st 2001 in London) calls for an end to the war against terrorism being waged by the USA and its allies (<http://stopwar.org.uk/content/blogcategory/24/41/> accessed 3/3/10).

^{vii} In these publications, which appeared in national newspapers and the right-wing journal *Salisbury Review*, he invoked racist stereotypes, such as ‘a volatile Sikh’, and claimed that the education of English children in schools, where there were large numbers of Asian children, was suffering (Khanum 1992: 132).

^{viii} See the following website for links to articles from *The Guardian* newspaper <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/behzti/0,15658,1379671,00.html> (accessed 3/3/10).