Economic Migrant or Hyphenated British? Writing about difference in London's East End

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Introduction

As in many other European Union countries the issue of immigration has recently become even more intense. Since 9/11 immigration has become embroiled with an anxious debate involving politicians and the media about terrorism, civil rights and the future of multiculturalism. At the heart of this debate is the issue of whether newcomers are to be categorised as economic migrants or as new hyphenated types of citizens (black British or British Asian, for example). The category of economic migrant suggests that people are arriving primarily to make as much money as possible before returning. Hyphenated British indicates a movement from outsider to insider, from temporary resident to permanent settler and from a predominantly homogeneous to an increasingly heterogeneous society. Within this multi-layered debate about immigration there are two other strands which I want to explore in this chapter – (a) the ways in which the focus shifts beyond recent events to a history of immigration to Britain and (b) the relationship between Britain and its constituent parts, especially England.

My approach will be constructivist in its analysis of the ways in which national and other identities have been ideologically constructed over time (see, for example, Bhabha 1990; Hall 1991). I want to investigate how national majorities are constructed through the particular practices of writing (see, for example, Giles and Middleton 1995) and how boundaries (those performed through social interaction as well as expressed in imaginative communication) between majorities and minorities may weaken or be redefined. The concept of hybridity directs us to explore the various forms of mixing which can lead to new ethnicities as some people come to occupy the liminal space on the boundary. In other words, those arriving as economic migrants may well stay and either they or their descendants develop new identifications with the nation which are shaped by interaction with the majority. Indeed, this process reveals how fraught the process of maintaining a strong boundary between majorities and minorities or insiders and outsiders can be. Post-modern and post-national conditions, shaped by global flows, transnational institutions and regional nationalisms, may be creating a far more fragmentary and contingent situation.

Current debates about economic migrants and new, hybrid ethnicities are bound up with discussions about the break-up of Britain (Nairn 1981, 2000; Crick 1995) and the growth of regional nationalisms in Scotland and Wales encouraged by political devolution (McCrone 2001). The tension between the image of homogeneous insularity and an active engagement with diverse peoples around the globe was complemented by the long-established tension between British and English national identity. As Kumar (2003) has pointed out, the expression of English nationalism has been complicated by a long-established sense of 'missionary nationalism' which conflated distinctions between England and Britain (at least for may English people as opposed to other inhabitants of the 'British Isles). The possible development of a revived English nationalism is also being considered (Kumar 2003).

The recent debates about Britain as a multicultural society have resulted in numerous accounts of the nation's multicultural past. British people are presented as the product of repeated waves of immigration reaching back into pre-Roman times. Against essentialised versions of a pure island race, commentators have talked about a mongrel people whose ancestry can be traced to Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Viking and Norman settlements. The story of an island open to outsiders is brought to the present day by references to French Huguenot settlers in the late seventeenth century, Irish migration from the 18th century, the movement of black slaves from the Caribbean during the 18th and early 19th century, East European Jewish settlement in the last 19th century, German Jewish arrivals in the 1930s, the post-Second World War settlement of European migrant workers immediately after the Second World war, followed by migration from the British Empire and Commonwealth and more recent flows of refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers from the East European countries joining the European Union.

What is so striking about the French Huguenot and subsequent migrations is its highly urbanised character. Many Irish and post-1945 European workers found jobs in the countryside but the vast majority of these newcomers became urban residents. The rapid expansion of Britain's urban population during the 19th and early 20th centuries was bound up with industrialisation and working class areas in the largest urban concentrations were occupied by large numbers of overseas arrivals. London's prominence within the nation as the seat of government and as both a commercial and industrial powerhouse was underpinned by large-scale immigration from the surrounding countryside as well as by the arrival of overseas migrants. The capital's 'East End' rapidly expanded during the 19th century as factories, small trading and dock enterprises drew on the labour of an ethnically and racially diverse working class population. The late Victorian East End was popularly presented as London's dark and dangerous Other where poverty, crime and aliens were gathered together. The moral panic surrounding Jack the Ripper in 1888 drew on this popular representation and highlighted the arrival of poor Jews from Poland and Russia.

I will focus on the ways in which immigration has been represented in particular narratives – novels – by those who see themselves or may be seen by others as members of a particular minority. The authors of these novels challenge dominant versions of national identity through their evocation of alternative understandings of the nation. At the same time I want to explore their marginal position as writers, arguing (along with other commentators) that the very practice of writing separates them from the community they are writing about. My focus will be upon two writers in particular, whose writing is not understood as representing a wider body of literature but illustrative of the issues outline above. Finally, I will bring together two periods – the 1930s and the present day – in order to analyse the construction of both British and English identity.

Representing the East End during the 1930s – Simon Blumenfeld and 'Jew Boy'

By the end of the 1930s the children and grandchildren of the East European Jews, who had settled in the area during the late 19th century, were making their presence felt in numerous ways. They expanded the ethnic niche developed by their elders, not only by entering the garment trade but also developing craft trades and the service

sector of small retail and wholesale shops. As the Jewish settlement spread out from the concentrations around Spitalfields and Whitechapel into Stepney and Bethnal Green, the numbers of synagogues and recreational clubs increased and Jews began to make a deep impression on the political and trade union life of the Stepney and Bethnal Green boroughs, in particular. Young (predominantly male) Jews were attracted to the Labour and Communist parties, as well as Zionist groups, and entered the Garment Workers union (see Kershen 1997). They were deeply involved in the rent strikes of the 1930s as housing became a crucial resource in an impoverished East End where borough councils and the London County Council were attempting to improve living conditions through slum clearance and the expansion of council housing. They also took a keen interest in political events beyond British shores, particularly the Palestine question, the plight of German Jews after Hitler's accession to power in 1933, and the struggle between Republicans and Nationalists in Spain after 1935.

By the late 1930s the vast majority of the first generation of Jewish settlers were fifty years old and above. Their children and grandchildren had been born and brought up in the East End and some were already moving out eastwards to the vast London County Council estate in Becontree or north towards Golders Green. They had been educated in local elementary schools, while a small proportion proceeded to grammar school and even university. The religious and cultural traditions of East European Jewry were joined by new influences as the second and third generation began to assimilate local working class and national lifestyles. English became the medium through which young Jews reflected on the combination of old and new influences and the novel – a nineteenth century mode of literary expression – was adopted as the prime means through which these reflections could be mediated.

However, the second generation of Jewish writers wanted to adapt the novel mode to the conditions of the East End. They rejected the dominant model of novel writing, represented by the Bloomsbury group, as 'bourgeois' and pursued a social realist mode which would reflect the realities of East End life. The most well known exponent of this form of writing was Simon Blumenfeld, whose novel - *Jewboy* – published in 1935 will be the focus of the following discussion. (Space does not permit consideration of his other novel *Phineas Kahn: The Life of Phineas Kahn* (1937/1988) and other writers such as Arnold Levy and John Goldman).

The hero of *Jewboy* is, significantly, a second generation Jewish garment worker. The story begins in the heart of the Jewish East End – Whitechapel – and describes his fight for survival in post-First World War London. This struggle involves his job in a garment factory where his trade union enthusiasm leads to him being sacked. It also shapes his emotional and sexual existence since there is the continual threat of an unwanted pregnancy and the strain of surviving as a couple from respectable but poorly paid work. After a brief involvement with a Jewish girl, he lives with a non-Jewish working class woman, who becomes a West End prostitute after living as a servant in an East End Jewish trader family. His cultural sustenance comes from the famous Artists Circle meetings and concerts in Whitechapel. Here he meets a young fair haired English middle class woman whom he later meets and confronts in her West End flat. After unsuccessful attempt to get a visa to work in Soviet Russia the story ends with a political rally in Hyde Park where he meets a black American friend who appears at the beginning of the novel.

The novel has a clearly stated political position. Jewish workers are part of an international proletariat exploited by western capitalism. The harsh conditions of East End life are the local manifestation of a structured inequality, which transcends national boundaries. At the same time Blumenfeld acknowledges that nationalism acts to divide workers. When the hero realises the impossibility of his dream to emigrate to Russia, he resolves to stay in Britain to fight for working class rights across the divisions of religion and race. The high culture of classical music and literature acts as a bridge not only between Jews and their Continental European heritage but also, potentially, between working class and middle class Londoners. His interests contrast with his girlfriend's enthusiasm for popular culture and encourage him to pursue the beautiful middle class woman. She, in turn, is intrigued by his 'exoticism' but her collection of classical recordings cannot compensate for her political conservatism and emotional frigidity. In a powerful passage Blumenfeld describes their mutual exasperation after Alec questions the source of her wealth:

> 'And where do you get all that money? – Two guineas a week for a flat! Do you work for it?
> She closed the lid of the gramophone sharply.
> 'I don't have to!' she said. 'I have an income from my father, Isn't that good enough?'
> 'No, it isn't!' he retorted. 'It isn't honest. That money comes from us, it's stolen from us, from the workers!'
> She became very angry, but she controlled herself rigidly. After all she was a lady. She drew herself up, and her nostrils dilated.
> 'I'm afraid you've made a mistake,' she said aloofly. 'My father is a landowner; our money comes from the earth, the English earth, my country. "Stolen from us!" – Why you should be the last to speak. You and your people are only guests here!' (1986:254)

Alec, not surprisingly, challenges this dismissal by first describing his father's life as an immigrant and than asserting his birthright:

> But I was born here. This is MY country. Much more than yours. I help to produce its wealth – when I am allowed to do so – And you? What wealth have you ever created? Your country! It's MY country – because I work here – not yours!'
> 'Now you're talking like a Jew,' she answered icily. 'One who has no country.'
> 'But I don't need a country!' he exclaimed. 'The whole world is my country! Isn't it time they threw overboard the old superstitions? Up to this line it's my country, beyond this line it's yours. Away will all this mumbo-jumbo. Every country belongs to us! – To the workers. Only to us!' (1986:255)

In terms of national discourse what is significant about the 1930s is the way in which Englishness was constructed through rural themes and pastoral myths (Kumar 2003: 229-30). The squalor, overcrowding and noise of the nation's industrial towns and cities was shunned for the 'timeless' life of the English countryside (Kumar, 230). At the same time middle class writers such as Graham Greene, George Orwell and even a scion of the Bloomsbury School such as Virginia Woolf reflected a widespread

disillusion with England and its political, social and military elites. Pre-First World War assertions 'of England's imperial greatness or economic progress were impossible to sustain in the aftermath of an imperialist war or the grinding depression which followed' (Giles and Middleton 1995: 6).

Representing the Contemporary East End: Monica Ali and *Brick Lane*

As Ken Worpole notes (1983, Simon Blumenfeld's career as a writer illustrates his own marginality to the local community he was trying to portray. Already second generation British Jews were leaving the Jewish East End and significantly Alec gets deeply involved not with a local Jewish woman but a *shiksa* - an outsider – and he goes to live in Hackney outside Whitechapel and other densely occupied Jewish neighbourhoods. Monica Ali's recent novel – *Brick Lane* – has some uncanny parallels with *Jewboy* in the sense that it has been lauded by some reviewers as a convincing portrait of a minority and immigrant dilemmas but the author is even more marginal than her 1930s predecessor.

The novel focuses on a first generation heroine, Nazneen, who is born in Bangladesh but comes to London to live with her husband. She brings her two daughters up on a dilapidated council estate near Brick Lane and gradually frees herself from the closed world of a traditional Bangladeshi housewife. She achieves this freedom by joining a small group of Bangladeshi women who, like her, earn some money by homeworking for the local garment industry. She also compensates for the inadequate relationship she has with her husband, Chanu, whose dreams of success are never realized, through a brief affair with Karim, a British Bangladeshi activist, who introduces her to local community politics. The story builds to a climax as secular and Islamist community leaders vie for local control resulting in a riot on Brick Lane which traps Nazneen's daughters.

Tellingly, Nazneen is unimpressed by the struggle between the two community groups and breaks through the police cordon in order to rescue her daughters. The book ends not with hopes of a glorious socialist future as in *Jewboy* but personal emancipation within a British Bangladeshis women's commune making fashion items for the garment industry. Chanu returns to Bangladesh without Nazneen and the daughters but Nazneen remains closely in touch with him and ends her affair with the young activist. Freedom is to be gained through working friendships with other Bangladeshi women not in a new relationship with a man.

Although the story explores Nazneen's life in London, it also records her close relationship with her sister who remains in Bangladesh. Her sister's life is not a happy one – she runs off with a man from a neighbouring village and after a series of unhappy experiences in Dhaka, she ends up as a servant in Dhanmondi, one of the capital's wealthy neighourhoods. Although her relationships with men fail, she remains determined to follow her heart and not commit suicide like her mother. In the last letter, which she writes to Nazneen before she runs off with her employers' cook, she rejects her mother's act of despair:

> Amma always say we are women what can we do? If she here now I know what she say I know it too well. But I am not like her. Waiting around.

> Suffering around. She wrong. So many ways. At the end only she act. She who think all path is closed for her. She take the only one forbidden. (363)

Nazneen and her sister's lives may have taken different paths but as women they are united by a personal politics of female agency and liberation. The book ends on this positive note as Nazneen is taken by her daughters and Bangladeshi female friends to Liverpool Street and the City of London for a surprise. They arrive at an ice-rink where her friend, Razia, prepares to skate.

> Nazneen turned round. To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there.
> She said, '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.' (p.413)

This optimism about England as a land of possibility is linked to a more general feminist politics of liberation which may help to partly explain the book's success in both the UK and the USA. In terms of our central theme – economic migrant or hyphenated British – *Brick Lane* shares with *Jewboy* the belief that the newcomers are becoming members of a changing British nation. Their Britishness is mediated through the social and cultural heritage of their country of origin which produces a hyphenated identity through the interweaving of class, gender, generation, religion and language. In *Brick Lane* there is no personal confrontation with a representative of the white middle class as in *Jewboy*.

Monica Ali locates local political conflict within the Bangladeshi community as secular and Islamist activists seek to dominate how their community is represented to the outside world. Whereas Alec in *Jewboy* becomes involved with a white working class woman and lives outside the Jewish heartland, Nazneen lives within her community and only breaks sexual taboos through an affair with a second generation British Bangladeshi. Nazneen is only beginning to develop a hyphenated British identity and it is her daughters – the second generation brought up in the East End - who are engaged in comparing Nazneen's generation with their much more Anglicised peers.

Monica Ali's decision to confine her story primarily to Nazneen and other members of the first generation justifies in many ways this containment within a particular community and locality. Simon Blumenfeld focuses on the second generation in *Jewboy* and in some respects it would be easier to compare *Brick Lane* with *The Life of Phineas Kahn* which tracks the life of a first generation settler in the East End. However, in both novels Blumenfeld is keen to show working class Jews exploring the world beyond the East End. They go on walks outside London, they visit relatives who have already moved to the suburbs, they 'go up west' to London's theatres and cinemas and they keep in touch with their relatives back in Russia. In *Brick Lane* we see the same process at work since Nazneen meets her lover in the West End, maintains close contact with her sister and husband in Dhaka and ends up skating in the City of London. However, characters from the local white working class are few in number and shadowy while London's suburbs and the countryside are unexplored.

What this raises, of course, is the issue of authenticity and the social location of the writer. Monica Ali, like Simon Blumenfeld, occupies a marginal position by the act of writing about 'her community'. Her marginality is also reinforced by her parentage since her father comes from Bangladesh but from the district of Mymensingh rather than Sylhet, while her mother is a white English woman. She was not raised in the East End and after studying at Oxford she married a white, middle class English man. *Brick Lane* is a work of the imagination informed by her father's tales of Mymensingh countryside and her reading about the lives of Bangladeshi women, such as Naila Kabir's study of the London and Dhaka garment industry, *The Power to Choose* (2000). At the same time, *Brick Lane* has been presented as, to some degree, a realistic portrait of a little known minority and this resulted in considerable criticism of her account. Indeed, the portrayal of Chanu particularly offended leaders of a local Bangladeshi community group, who ominously likened *Brick Lane* to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Furthermore, Nazneen's adulterous affair was unlikely to recommend itself to those defending conventional notions of the dutiful and respectful Bangladeshi wife.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have brought together two novels written at different periods about minority communities in the same area of London. My aim has been to explore the ways in which they portray the move from temporary economic migrant to permanent hyphenated settler through the marginal position of the writer. What conclusions can be drawn from such a juxtaposition?

In *Jewboy* the second generation of settlers are no longer economic migrants and are developing a distinctive identity as hyphenated British. While Simon Blumenfeld is well aware that his characters are brought up within a Jewish community, he emphasizes their membership of a national and international proletariat. He rejects Zionist exclusivism and middle class Jews who wish to be totally assimilated. Alec's upbringing is Jewish but he moves away from the Jewish heartland to live with a non-Jewish former prostitute. His political struggle transcends ethnic and national boundaries and enables him to challenge the insular and racist nationalism of the beautiful middle class woman whose classical musical interests he shares.

In *Brick Lane* we are introduced to the more restricted world of a first generation woman who is settling in London and bringing up two daughters despite her husband's refusal to stay. Monica Ali's story is shaped by contemporary single issue politics and feminist politics in particular where personal freedom is gained not through political parties and community organization but by sharing work and personal experience with other local, non-conforming Bangladeshi women. The economic system of global capitalism is accepted because liberation can be gained through a personal politics of gendered liberation in a country where you have the power to choose. In Dhaka her sister is also able to make choices but the price is poverty and dependence on unreliable men.

Both writers are marginal to the communities they portray. Simon Blumenfeld appears to be a more authentic representative since he was born in the East End and only moved away in adult life. Monica Ali was brought up in a middle class world of mixed identities far away from East London and she relies on texts and imagination

just as much as close observation of East End life. At the same time both are writers whose narratives are shaped by the conventions of the English novel where authentic representation has an ambiguous place. The well-known Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens have established some key tropes about London which shape subsequent writing about the city. The East End is presented as a place of poverty, danger, passion and alien exoticism which Simon Blumenfeld and other 1930s working class writers wanted to qualify or reject. Monica Ali's book in many ways appears to confirm the tropes of Dickensian London, which inform other contemporary writers about London's mysterious East End such as Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd. Bangladeshis appear to be the latest in a long line of impoverished immigrants, whose lives are narrated for the inspection of a suburban white middle class readership.

Yet what redeems these narratives is their insistence on liberation, whether socialist or feminist. The characters retain their dignity and their agency. Furthermore, they act as an inspiration or challenge to other writers who wish to portray 'their community'. What remains to be seen is whether the kinds of censorship demanded by local community leaders after the publication of *Brick Lane* will lead to new forms of 'politically correct' writing, where feminist emancipation is replaced by careful observance of fundamentalist principles. Can the western urban novel survive such a transformation?

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