From Diasporas to Multi-Locality: Writing British Asian Cities

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

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Introduction

This chapter 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 involves the issue of authenticity – not only who are ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ but also 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 also provide arenas where people can act out their claims to be the authentic voice of ‘their community’ and challenge the authority of others. This chapter will explore these issues of representation and authenticity through a discussion of academic and non-academic texts and how these provide the background for a lively debate about authenticity at the AHRC workshop we held in the East End during September 2006.

One of the challenges when writing about London is the enormous volume of literature, which has been produced over such a long period. The city has dominated mainland Britain for centuries – the main commercial centre and hub of global trade as well as the seat of government. London’s dominance was established well before industrialisation created the bustling factory cities of Birmingham and Bradford and it far outstripped Manchester and Leicester, which also began life as Roman garrisons.

London’s pre-eminence has not just been based on political, commercial and industrial strength. The development of print capitalism during the 16th and 17th centuries made London a centre for writers of all kinds – journalists, novelists, poets, pamphleteers, government officers and clerics. As well as producing a wide range of textual representations about the nation, these writers also reflect on the bustling city where they lived. In so doing, certain key tropes have been established – London as exciting, enervating, diverse and deeply unequal. The commercial heart of the metropolis – the City of London – is the key driver of this economic inequality together with the centre of political and social power in Whitehall and Westminster. However, what caught many a Victorian observer’s eye was the contrast between London’s two ‘ends’ – the seat of pleasure, the West End, and the heart of dark and dangerous poverty, the East End (see Eade 2000. Here we are going to focus on the eastern end through an exploration of one particular locality on the edge of the City of London – Spitalfields.

Spitalfields’ growth as a suburb outside the City’s eastern boundary was intimately bound up with immigration. French Protestant silk weavers settled in the area during the late 17th and early 18th century and as their merchant elite prospered so the streets, which now form the revived conservation area, grew. During the 19th century economic decline was accompanied by the settlement of new immigrants, mainly Irish Catholics and those attracted from the local countryside. Spitalfields and

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1 The onset of a severe economic downturn during 2008, has raised urgent questions concerning the role of the finance and business sector in London’s future economic life.
the expanding East End, more generally, became associated in the minds of the middle and upper class to the west with grinding poverty, criminality and aliens. This stereotype was established through the writing of novelists such as Dickens and ‘yellow press’ journalists 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 East European Jews and the anti-semitic nerve, which this touched, both locally and nationally (see Fishman 1988, Kershen 1997).

This powerful trope did not go unchallenged, however. A more sympathetic literary representation of East End life was developed by Israel Zangwill, whose parents were East European Jewish immigrants, in Children of the Ghetto (1892). A more sensationalist account – A Child of the Jago (1896) – was written by a local journalist and art collector, Arthur Morrison and what is significant about his book is the way in which he blends fact and fiction and develops another persistent theme – the struggle to escape the ‘ghetto’. This is a theme, which was taken up by second generation local Jewish writers in the 1920s and 1930s (see Eade 2000, 2007). In their development of the working class novel (see Worpole 1983), the struggles for survival by young, second generation Jewish men are described as well as their movement out of the poor, Jewish enclaves of what were then the boroughs of Bethnal Green and Stepney. These novels contributed to a more positive image of an East End where people live normal lives and share a general desire to lead respectable lives amidst economic insecurity, poor housing and few amenities. Furthermore, the new generation of writers were ‘born and bred’ in the East End and were far more politically engaged as the local Labour and Communist parties sought to harness local class and ethnic solidarities in their attempts to improve local conditions.

These local writers were joined by other observers and commentators. The magisterial study by Charles Booth of poverty across the metropolis - Life and Labour of the People in London – was published in seventeen volumes between 1889 and 1903 and was followed by the more narrowly academic New Survey of London Life and Labour, which appeared between 1930 and 1935 and was led by Sir Harold Llewellyn Smith at the LSE. 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, who were employed by both the local borough councils and London County Council. These streams of academic, media and council officials overlapped to some extent during the Second World War. During the 1941 ‘blitz’ the mass observation movement 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 a central theme of local economic decline and social fragmentation emerged. In the academic literature this theme found its most famous expression in Young and Willmott’s study of the break-up of Bethnal Green

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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.
working class as people moved to the new estates in the eastern suburbs – *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957). One of the reasons for the book’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 Chicago School. However, in the context of the East End, what made the use of community so effective was Young and Willmott’s carefully grounded demonstration of how enduring social ties could be despite – or perhaps because of – poverty, job insecurity and poor housing. In fact, they showed that the rehousing of East Enders in the eastern suburbs did not bring emotional contentment, since people were parted from the interlocking ties of family and kinship which sustained a strong sense of community in Bethnal Green. Once again a positive image of the East End was supported by the book and the movement out to the suburbs, which the Chicago School helped to explain in terms of an urban structure, was portrayed as a social loss.

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

One of the most important changes taking place after the Second World War has been London’s transformation from an imperial capital to a global or world city. Although London has long relied on trade across the globe, the flows of capital, goods and information have gradually changed as trading links with the empire and then the Commonwealth have weakened as economic and political ties with Continental Europe have strengthened. London’s role as a major 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 N. America and the Pacific region in particular. London 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, Eade 1997, Fainstein *et al.* 1992, Fainstein 1994, 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\(^3\). 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 (*Jame Masjid*).

The first key exploration of the Bangladeshis (primarily Sylheti) first generation’s experience of migration was produced by Caroline Adams, who worked in the borough’s schools and youth service. *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain* (1987) is divided into two main sections – the first provided a history of Sylhet, the *lascars’* journeys between the

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\(^3\) 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.
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 homeland and the various movements across Britain as they sought work in the Midlands and N. England industrial sector and/or made a life in the East End.

As in the later oral histories produced by Yousuf Choudhury (*The Roots and Tales of the Bangladeshi Settlers*, 1993, and *Sons of the Empire*, 1995) these interviews reveal the pioneering spirit of these young, single men and their navigation 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.
> (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 under ‘Red Ken’ (Livingstone) and in the Inner London Education Authority and political changes back in Bangladesh. Drawing on the Foucauldian approach towards power, knowledge and resistance I analysed 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 at this time by secular debates concerning anti-racism and class, it was already evident that issues concerning Islam were emerging at local and more global levels. These became increasingly prominent during the late 1980s and the 1990s and are analysed, for example, through the Islamisation of urban space and Muslim identity politics in the context of the global city (Eade 1997, Eade, Garbin, Fremeaux 2002, Begum and Eade 2005, Eade and Garbin 2002, 2006), the social and cultural ties between Bangladesh and Britain (Gardner 1995, 2002), the colonial heritage and post-colonial links (Visram 1996,

The public articulation of Muslim identity contributed to a complex interweaving of social identities, which is also explored in more policy oriented research, such as studies of housing, gender and urban space (Phillips 1998, Phillips, Davis and Ratcliffe 2007, Begum 2008), language and education (Ahmed 2008), health issues (Marks and Hilder 1997) and multicultural politics (Keith 1995, 2008). 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.

A striking feature of this academic outpouring is the paucity of Bangladeshi ‘insiders’. The small number of British Bangladeshi researchers is not surprising given the socio-economic profile of the population. However, it sharply contrasts with the wide range of Bangladeshi political representatives and community organisations in the borough, which were a prime object of the academic gaze. The Spitalfields workshop held as part of the AHRC Networks project provided the opportunity to discuss this gap and in doing so, the focus moved implicitly from the issue of textual representation to how texts were performed in public arenas.

**Insiders and Outsiders: Performing Texts**

The workshop built on the format, which was agreed 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. During the preparation for the Tower Hamlets event invitations were sent to young artists, who were contributing to the lively mix of eastern and western popular music styles and who had been interviewed for an oral history project led by Swadhinata, a local Bangladeshi heritage organisation. The director of the film version of Brick Lane, was also invited. The session eventually involved contributions by the director of the Kobi Nazrul cultural centre where the workshop was held and a well known baul singer, who had performed at the launch of the Swadhinata Trust’s oral history book – *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain* – the evening before.

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 W. 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*.

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4 A particular poetic form spread across the Indian sub-continent by Sufi mystics from the 12th century.
The Director of the Kobi Nazrul Centre is himself a well known Bengali artistic figure. He has long been involved in the Bengal language movement, writes plays and directs 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 has 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 position as director of the Kobi Nazrul Centre he has acted as a prominent bridge between culture and politics and between the Bangladeshi community and white outsiders (politicians, administrators, leaders of NGOs and artists).

His wide cultural brief contrasted considerably with the interests of the baul singer as became clear during the session. Speaking in Sylheti, the singer celebrated baul music as the authentic voice of a Bengali folk tradition, which had been developed over centuries by itinerant singers across the Bengal delta and which still expressed the soul of the Bengali people. The music draws on both Hindu bhakti 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, W. 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. This link was made more explicit in the 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, 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 et al.: 129)

Yet, while the community centre was named in honour of Kobi Nazrul, it had to provide a general service to the community through its varied programme, which included classes in Bengali drama, poetry, modern and classical music, singing and dancing and drop-in sessions for local women. The Centre provided a platform, therefore, for all kinds of contemporary cultural events where topical issues could be addressed. To illustrate further his personal commitment to this wide brief, the Director left after the session to get a tape of his music to play for us accompanied by the English translation.

This session involved, then, a performance in front of ‘insiders’ (Bengalis) and ‘outsiders’ (the rest of us) concerning different cultural agendas, tradition and

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5 His speech was slowly summarised by other Bangladeshi participants.
6 Devotional songs particularly associated with Vaishnava Hindu sects which deeply Bengali Hindu society.
7 Baul songs written by Lalon Shah during the 19th century.
authenticity. It was a performance, which was shaped not only by ethnicity but also by the intersection of gender, generation and class. Moreover, in a broader perspective we could place the exchange within two different performative musical traditions - the hybrid tradition of *baul* singing in the Bengal cultural region and a more recent hybridised mode of using Bengali music to speak about racism and anti-racism in Britain.

During 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 W. 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 article 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. These cultural roots have always been and always will be very important to him. In other words, ['Bapi’ Das Baul] 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 such as Asian Dub Foundation, Transglobal Underground, Fun-Da-Mental, Natacha Atlas, Zap Mama, Elisa Wout among many others. 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.⁹

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). 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. As the director noted, Bangladeshi artists are experiencing increasing pressure from Islamist groups and cited the cuts he had made to a film as an example.

The issues of authenticity, representation and the boundaries between insiders and outsiders are also implicit in the role played by language during this exchange. After the first workshop at Bradford we decided to try to encourage the use of other

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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’\(^\text{10}\) 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.\(^\text{11}\)

The oral history project sought to fulfil its secularist 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 date 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. While Awami League leaders have subsequently engaged with the politicisation of Muslim identity, they have tried to

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\(^{11}\) Ibid
distance themselves from their main opponent, the Bangladesh National Party, through their rhetoric. The party’s constitution, for example, declares that:

The fundamental principles of the Bangladesh Awami Leagues shall be Bengali Nationalism, Democracy, Secularism or in other words ensuring freedom of all religions as well as non-communal politics and Socialism, that is to say—the establishment of an exploitation-free society and social Justice.  

Given Swadhinata’s political leanings the book, Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain, began 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. In the second section, which discusses community representation in Britain from the 1970s the contribution of white ‘outsiders’ is highlighted even more. 9 of the 21 interviewees are white British (7 male and 2 female), while 9 are Bangladeshi Muslims (8 male and 1 female) and 3 are Bengali Hindus or Christians (1 male and 2 female).

In the light of the previous discussion of musical hybridity and opposition from Muslim purifiers, the third section of the project provides the most interesting material. Here the emphasis is much more on the creative impulse generated by British Bangladeshis. All but one of the 15 interviewed are Bangladeshi Muslims (12 male and 3 female) and their ages range between 66 and the early 20s. They had developed a wide range of skills as dancers, singers, instrumentalists, composers, arrangers and lyricists. While the younger artists engaged closely with the wider musical scene, they often maintained close ties with their community through local youth groups and transnational ties. The lead singer of State of Bengal, for example, set up the band in 1987:

After he returned to London from a visit to … Bangladesh where he met and interacted with traditional musicians and dancers. ‘State of Bengal’ mixes Bengali and Western street style dance to create a style that reflected the diverse facets and synergy between the two cultures in the UK. He has also worked intensely with Asian youth groups in London’s East End, many of whose members went onto become ‘core’ DJs of the Asian Underground scene. (Eade et al. 2006: 12)

These artists, not surprisingly, reject the sharp separation between culture and religion advanced by Islamist ‘purifiers’. For one of the female performers dance and Sufi music could be easily and creatively combined for Muslims:

I was always influenced by Sufi music. I was a huge fan of Qawali. I was a huge fan of dance music. Now you can imagine if you put Sufi and dance, you can see what is has all to do with. It’s a gift that Allah has given because you are … connected spiritually to Allah. … it’s a combination between dance, which is again powerful, and Sufi which is also powerful but that power is connected with Allah. Your [songs are] about creation and about our Prophet – it’s praising them. (2006: 119)

The diverse musical traditions of the Indian sub-continent, including Nazrul’s contribution, are eagerly explored as another explains:

There was a time I used to like love songs a lot. Now … I do like love songs but [at] the same time I like the spiritual songs more. I like Urdu and Hindi ghazals … I also like the Islamic ghazals. The Nazrul songs are also included in the ghazals. I like the local music of Sylhet and the Loko Geeti very much. (2006: 120)

He was inspired by one artist in particular, who showed that musicians could lead respectable lives as Muslims even as they drew on all kinds of traditions:

I follow him 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 issue of Muslim respectability was even more pressing for female performers. In the highly charged atmosphere of the melas (festivals), they could be targets for some males in the audience as one prominent singer recounted:

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 cam 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)

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

In this section I want to focus on two textual representations which seek to portray the lives of Bangladeshi women, on the one hand, and the world of radical Islamists, on the other. It would be perverse to ignore Monica Ali’s novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), given its commercial success, the controversy surrounding it, the opposition of Bangladeshi businessmen to using Brick Lane for the film version and our own references to the book during the AHRC workshop. The novel 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 by joining a group of women who supplement the family income through taking in garments from the local textile factories. Her ‘emancipation’ leads her to become 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 fellow homeworkers and her daughters. The book ends not in Brick Lane or other parts of Tower Hamlets but in the glitzy surroundings of the City of London on the borough’s western border. They go to the ice rink in Moorgate and as her friend, Razia, gets ready to skate, Nazneen exclaims:

… ‘But you can’t skate in a sari’

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Razia was already lacing her boots. ‘This is England’, she said. ‘You can do whatever you like’ (2003:41)

Monica Ali links the story of Nazneen’s emancipation from traditional gender roles to the life of her sister, Hasina, back in Bangladesh. Hasina’s life is much more insecure and dependent on men. She runs away from her family home with a man from a neighbouring village and ends up as a prostitute in Dhaka. Although Hasina has reached the lowest rungs of society, she refuses to despair like her mother who committed suicide. So the two sisters are united in their rejection of conventional notions about their role as women, who should be embedded within traditional family structures. The themes of female liberation and England as a land of possibility, together with the mixture of fact and fiction about a little-known ethnic minority, may partly explain the book’s success. Another factor may have been the way in which Monica Ali satirises both the secular and Islamist activists - they are shown to be posturing idealists, who offer no realistic solutions to Nazneen’s dilemmas and desires.

This textual representation of the East End draws on the familiar tropes of immigrants struggling to find both personal fulfilment in a poor neighbourhood. The book’s commercial success, bolstered by the film, put Brick Lane on the mainstream map far more effectively than the other texts we have discussed here. At the same time it attracted the ire of some local Bangladeshis. Between 2003 and 2006 various protests were made and the media reports of them raised a number of issues about the relationship between fact and fiction, community image and representation. The initial protest against the book 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. The Bangladeshi community group complained that ‘the book treated Bangladeshis as "economic migrants" and portrayed them as ignorant,’

Among the objections raised in an 18 page letter to the publisher, the BBC report picked out a passage where Nazneen’s husband, Chanu, describes local Bangladeshis as “uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition.”

The controversy died down only to be revived during 2006 by the plans to use Brick Lane for the film. This time the protest was led by Mahmoud Roug, 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 represented himself as an insider who was only expressing the views of local Bangladeshis:

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.

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 organisers of the protest were keen to avoid the opprobrium, which surrounded the burning of The Satanic Verses in Bradford during the late 1980s:

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15 Ibid
Assurances were given by local businessman and protest organiser Abdus Salique that the widely-reported plans to burn copies of the book were incorrect.17

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. (July 31, 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. (July 31, 2006)

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.


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).

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.


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 was 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 from his father’s devotion to the renowned Sylheti pir, Shaikh Abd al-Latif, to the reformist Young Muslim Organisation, closely associated with the East London Mosque, to the more radical Hizb ut-Tahrir and then on to the Islamic Society of Britain and, eventually, to teaching jobs with his non-Bangladeshis Muslim girlfriend in Syria and Saudi Arabia.

The disillusioning experience of living and teaching in Saudi Arabia leads him to return to the University of London where he had taken his undergraduate degree and the East London Mosque where he had gained his first experience of ‘political Islam’. 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. While questioning what British Muslims are supposed to ‘integrate’ into – ‘[a]nti-social behaviour in our cities, high rates of abortion, alcohol abuse, and drug addiction’, as well as the ‘neglect of the elderly’, he looks beyond the incestuous and limited world of Islamist politics to a Britain where:

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)

In Ed Hussain’s account the local and the global are intimately linked through political struggle. The state contributes to this relationship through its strategy of 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). 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 were quick to praise the book. Anushka Asthana in The _Observer_ hailed the book as ‘a wake-up call for Britain’:

Husain 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.18

While Simon Jenkins writing in _The Sunday Times_ commented that:

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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.  

Others were more critical. Ziauddin Sarwar argued that Ed Hussain’s ‘suggestion that radicalisation of Muslim youth can be laid firmly on the door of Hizb’ is indicative of his ‘reductive, one-dimensional’ approach, 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-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.

Sarwar’s parting shot about government sympathy for the book is interesting since Ed Hussain went on to help establish The Quilliam Foundation which described itself as:

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.

It contributed to the government’s revision of its counter-terrorism strategy – Combat 2. The revision combined the existing commitment to combat terrorism by state agencies with rethinking how to tackle the causes of radicalisation over the long term. The Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, 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"

The drafting of Contest 2 had revealed according to UmmahPulse ‘an almost frightening lack of understanding of where normal Muslims are coming from’ and also the influence of particular pressure groups including Ed Hussain’s new group:

It also showed 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-

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19 ‘Confessions of a former fanatic’, April 29, 2007 http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1702333.ece
21 Ibid.
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 24 March 2009
researched, mediocre "big idea" namely that following the principles of Islam make one an "Islamist" and thus a threat to society.  

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 local imaginings were caught up in more global processes and institutions. Authors of these varied texts reached out to an audience beyond the locality and their audience responded in terms of their own political and ideological positions. The prestigious high rise offices on the edge of Spitalfields serve as physical reminders of London’s position as a ‘global city’ (see Sassen 1991, Eade 1997). In Tower Hamlets’ southern wards the impact of global forces is strikingly expressed by the Manhattanesque skyline of Canary Wharf in the Isle of Dogs. This radical ‘redevelopment’ of the borough has produced a clear socio-economic divide between north and south. In 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.

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 1994, 1996). 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 study of Bethnal Green - Family and Kinship in East London (1957) – introduced at the beginning of this chapter. 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 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 socio-economic changes, which have occurred during the last 15 years, complicate the central dualism between these two groups. The failure to appreciate this greater complexity:

rests largely in the authors’ seeming inability 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

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Marriott 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.

The ways in which the past influenced current social tensions is also explored by Georgie Wemyss in her discussion of the celebration of two colonial anniversaries during 2006:

The 1606 departure of English ‘settlers’ who built the first permanent English colony in North America at Jamestown, Virginia, and the 1806 opening of the East India Docks, half a century after the East India Company took control of Bengal following the battle of Plassey. Both events were associated with the Thames waterfront location of Blackwall in the east London borough of Tower Hamlets, an area with the highest Bengali population in Britain and significant links with North America through banks and businesses based at the regenerated Canary Wharf office complex.

She argues that a dominant discourse has been developed, which ignores the history of colonial exploitation. The New East End’s simplistic treatment of the tension between white and Bangladeshi residents over access to housing and other public services can be seen as shaped by and contributing to this dominant discourse and its silences:

Recent writing about contemporary Bengali and white community relationships, entitlements to welfare and discourses about the rights and responsibilities of citizens in east London builds on particular bundles of silences … about colonial Bengal accumulated over the past two hundred years. British Bengali belonging is marginalised as links between Britain and Bengal and the violence and oppression of British colonialism are obscured.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which community and locality have been represented through different types of text – novels, academic tomes, oral history projects, lyrics and urban developers. 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

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25 Rising East Online, Issue 4, May 2006, review by John Marriott

26 Ibid.

which particular groups and individuals should behave in public and private space, as well as how public space should be materially reshaped. 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 links are bound up with the social networks Bangladeshis have established between the country of origin and the diaspora but they also link Bangladeshis imaginatively to other Muslims around the globe.

These texts, the ways in which they are performed and the contests over values and authenticity are only in a very limited sense about the British Asian city.

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