

CHALLENGING THE CENTRE: THE RESPONSE OF BRITISH ASIAN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to outline the response of the British Asian community to the post-colonial situation of the former metropolitan centre. A selection of recent work by writers such as Salman Rushdie, Farrukh Dhondy and David Dabydeen, among others, is analyzed from a dual perspective. On one hand, these writers reflect how Asians and blacks in general have to cope with the racial prejudice of the host population. On the other hand, they defy the accepted notion of Britishness and redefine it to include non-white, non-Christian citizens. The paper will conclude by affirming that British Asian writers are offering the white British a valuable lesson about their own post-colonial identity.

In the years following World War II the massive labour shortage brought about a large-scale immigration of citizens from Britain's former colonies, especially the so-called New Commonwealth countries, namely the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. This phenomenon would have far-reaching consequences for the bulk of the British population who would equate this influx of non-white citizens with the demise of Britain as a world leader. Moreover, this post-war immigration gave rise to the growth of black communities in Britain, which meant that Afro-Caribbeans and Asians would be born and brought up in Britain and would consider themselves to be as British as their white neighbours despite the fact that the latter would find it hard to come to terms with this new concept of Britishness: non-white and often non-Christian.

It is because certain sectors of the UK population cannot assimilate Britain's post-imperial role and still refuse to accept that five percent of the population (2.7 million) belong to the ethnic minorities, that these new Britons have had to challenge the received notion of Britishness. This paper will analyse some recent work by the growing community of British Asian¹ writers from two main standpoints: the struggle *against* racism and *for* political recognition. To what extent can one be both British and black,

British and Muslim, or British and Punjabi-speaking? Are these categories mutually exclusive? It will be seen that the Asian experience looms largely in the work of British Asian writers, who cannot, or will not, free themselves from the 'ethnic' label.

The migrant is faced with a dilemma: assimilate and be tolerated, which involves accepting second class citizenship, or else opt out of accepted Britishness and establish another parallel version of it. The plight of the migrant, which tends to be his/her struggle against the pressures of racism, figures as the nucleus around which the work of many black writers operating from Britain is woven. Thus these writers are obliged to challenge the centre, or rather, the definition of "centre" in order to include peripheral experiences, that is, not being white, not being Christian and not having English as one's mother tongue, inside this mythical centre. The illusion of a centre has faded in recent years with the virtual take-over of the literary establishment by writers from a colonial background, Salman Rushdie being one of the most outstanding.²

British Asian writers, like other writers in former British colonies, tend to be pigeon-holed as 'post-colonial'³ writers, as if the category of post-colonial was a homogeneous one in all the countries that once belonged to the British Empire. Mishra and Hodge (1991) argue that the situation in white settler countries, such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, is in no way comparable to that of black, non-settler countries, such as in the Indian subcontinent or Africa. They point out that writers of the former, like Patrick White or Margaret Lawrence, can be read as aspirants to the canon, who certainly extend the standards of the imperial centre but do not actually challenge it. (ibid., 413) Writers from black, non-settler countries, however, have a very different task in hand. Their writing has to subvert received imperial notions of what constitutes human experience, which, for so many years, has been an essentially anglocentric one.⁴

While it is nonsensical to lump all Third World and Old Commonwealth writers under the umbrella heading of 'post-colonial', it is equally misleading to consider there to be any homogeneity even within any one society. Thus, Salman Rushdie and Farrukh Dhondy are representatives of the Indian diaspora, both having emigrated to Britain as young men, but there the similarities must end. Rushdie considers imperial attitudes to be rife in contemporary British society and writes from this perspective, whereas Dhondy confesses himself to be "anti-anti-racist"⁵ and lays greater emphasis on the shortcomings of Asian society itself. Likewise, the term 'post-colonial' should be applied to any writer publishing in English after the dismantling of the Empire, as British writers have been as exposed to the effects of decolonization as their counterparts in the countries ruled by Britain. However, the post-colonial label is a convenient one as it foregrounds notions of conflict and opposition, and questions the relationship between the centre and the periphery. Furthermore, and as Mishra and Hodge stipulate, post-colonial writing is based on three fundamental principles: political struggle, racism and a second language. These three tenets of post-colonialism may not always be present in the writing of the British Asians selected for this paper, but at least one of them can be said to lurk beneath the veneer of flippancy of some of the literary works I have chosen to represent the Asian reality in Britain today.

The concern over the swamping of Britain by alien people with alien cultures, which has reached almost obsessive heights is a recurrent theme with many British Asian authors. Salman Rushdie, probably the most influential and certainly the most (in)famous of all the writers who will be mentioned in this article, uses the colonized-turned-colonizer as a powerful leitmotif in his most controversial novel, *The Satanic*

Verses (1988). This extremely complex work is not the first to deal with the immigrant experience in Britain,⁶ but is possibly the most ambitious. It does not seem an exaggeration to say that the skeleton of the novel, that is the need to fight politicians in fiction and make all voices heard, was sketched out in his essay “Outside the Whale”, written in 1983. (Brennan, 1989:148-9) The politicians Rushdie sets out to fight are those who would persist in the one-sided view of imperial history, the glamour of the Raj and the essential evil of post-war immigration from the New Commonwealth.

In *The Satanic Verses* Salman Rushdie, playing on the underlying Powellite fear of post-colonial revenge in the shape of political domination,⁷ has his two main characters, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, miraculously saved from death after they plunge thirty thousand feet into the English Channel to be swept ashore at the same spot chosen by William the Conqueror, the last successful coloniser of Britain. Moreover, the aeroplane crash and the subsequent scattering of mechanical and human parts all over British airspace mimics the dispersal of empire builders and their European customs into the dark, remote areas of the globe. However, post-colonial history according to Rushdie takes a different turn. The two Indians, rather than avenge the two centuries of British rule over India, are punished for their very Indianness, a signifier for barbarism, backwardness, irrationality and evil. Furthermore, the character who is punished more severely is, paradoxically, the more anglicized of the two. Saladin Chamcha, whose first name evokes medieval threats to the integrity of Europe and whose surname means ‘flatterer’ or ‘crawler,’ is changed into a hairy demonic goat. Saladin, who in his previous ‘life’ had been a convinced Anglophile, is now depicted as a dark, evil being, bent on the destruction of the peaceful, white British. Saladin had disowned his original homeland and had even broken with his father in order to become as British as possible, little suspecting that he would be blackballed from the ‘club’ by the very people he was striving to imitate. It seems that what Homi Bhabha calls ‘mimic Englishmen’, that is Indians educated in English who come to regard themselves as more English than Indian, present more of a threat to the imperial power than the unsophisticated Oriental. The resemblance is more menacing than reassuring as the mimicry is never complete: the Indian always remains ‘not quite white.’ (Young, 1990:147) The reflecting image, therefore, is distorted and threatens to reverse at any moment the carefully established power relationship. Such fears of an attack at the integrity of Britain are twisted by Rushdie to make the arrival of the incomplete Englishman in the person of the unfortunate Chamcha far more disturbing than the settlement of any number of non-English speaking, non-Christian, non-urban, non-anglicized Indians.

The immigration officers who arrest Chamcha, suspected of entering the country illegally, display no surprise whatsoever at discovering him to be a goat. The bewildered Indian can find no logical explanation for the calm manner in which they treat his renewed circumstances.

‘This isn’t England,’ he thought, not for the first or last time. How could it be, after all; where in all that moderate and common-sensical land was there room for such a police van in whose interior such events as these might plausibly transpire? (p. 158)⁸

Much more humiliating for Chamcha than his transformation into a “supernatural imp” is the immigration authorities’ classification of him with “riff-raff from villages

in Sylhet or the bicycle-repair shops of Gujranwala.” (p.159) When he is forced to seek asylum in the Shaandaar Café, run by an ex-school teacher from Dhaka, and the haunt of many former Bangladeshi peasants, he is ashamed to admit that

I’m not your kind...You’re not my people. I’ve spent half my life trying to get away from you. (p. 253)

Equally condescending is Hanif Kureishi’s Asif in his play *Birds of Passage* (1983) who refuses to be lumped together with what he calls “the scum of Pakistan”. He complains that the British still continue to see all Asians as a mass of brown faces, devoid of individuality and rank.

the sweepers, the peasants, the drivers. They’ve never seen toilets. They’ve given us all a bad reputation because they don’t know how to behave. I couldn’t talk to them there, except to give them orders. And I won’t be solid with them here. (p. 40)

Likewise, Farrukh Dhondy’s middle-class suburbanite Indians in his play, *Romance, Romance* (1985) scorn uneducated, low-class Asians. For Chaddha, Patel and Bunny Singh any discrimination suffered by their less affluent countrymen is owing to the illusions they harbour of British fair play.

BUNNY “The mistake our community makes is to imagine they can get something out of the Labour Party. Who passed the first discriminatory laws?”
 CHADDHA “Quite, quite. The reason why our people go that way is because they are mostly peasants.”
 PATEL “Those people, they give us such a bad name. They spit here, there, everywhere.” (p. 16)

Rushdie’s description of immigrants as ‘translated people,’⁹ does not merely refer to the physical displacement of people from one side of the globe to another, but also to the enormous readjustment that has to be undertaken in order to learn a new language and emit alien sounds, and to rethink and redesign one’s frameworks of reference. In *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie takes this to the extreme of having his two migrants metamorphosed: Gibreel into his angelic namesake, and Saladin into Shaitan, the devil. Thus, the immigrant experience in Rushdie’s novel is seen as much more than an uprooting from a familiar environment. Migrants are, as it were, reborn into a new existence. A new world may come into existence for them, but for the British they continue to be coolies and ayahs. When Saladin Chamcha is taken to the hospital for immigrants while his real identity as a bona fide British subject is being established, he is horrified to find his fellow patients have all suffered some kind of eerie physical transformation: Senegalese holiday-makers are turned into slippery snakes, Nigerian businessmen sprout tails and an Indian male model sports a tiger’s head.

‘But how do they do it? Chamcha wanted to know.
 ‘They describe us’, the other whispered solemnly. ‘That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.’ (p. 168)

The much publicized image of the migrant as a threat to the very notion of Britishness is shown by Rushdie to mirror the upheaval caused by British colonial expansion:

We are here to change things. ...African, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Cypriot, Chinese, we are other than what we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans, if our mothers and fathers had not crossed the skies in search of work and dignity and a better life for their children. We have been made again: but I say that we shall also be the ones to remake this society, to shape it from the bottom to the top. (p. 414)

In Rushdie's world the brutalization of immigrants reaches unforeseen limits. Nocturnal raids on alleged illegal immigrant hideouts, not to mention virginity tests systematically carried out on frightened country women and girls in the wake of the 1971 Immigration Act to determine their age and relationship to their sponsor, all pale into nothingness compared with the power of the word of the white elite. And it is this all-powerful white word that defines the migrant as an aberration, because s/he is judged in terms of the received British national standard. Saladin's first experience of England, when a boy at boarding school, had been an embarrassingly painful one. He had struggled with a kipper for ninety minutes, not knowing how to eat the fish without filling his mouth with tiny bones. That he did succeed in eating the kipper was the "first step in his conquest of England." (p. 44) This incident, no doubt taken from Salman Rushdie's own personal experience at Rugby school, instead of discouraging the boy, made him even more determined to show the British what he was made of. Unfortunately, when his pyjamas are rudely pulled down by the immigration officers with the cry of "Opening time, Packy; let's see what you're made of!" (p. 157), Saladin can no longer aspire to conquer his holy land, the England he so passionately believed in. In spite of the laboriously learnt signs of Englishness, his colour acts as a much more powerful signifier for the police, who read him as just another 'Paki'. The much longed for metamorphosis is frustrated when the debonair Englishman, bent on the conquest of his blessed plot, is replaced by a foul smelling freak.

To a greater or lesser extent, Asian writers in Britain have felt a certain responsibility towards the marginalized, being themselves categorized in the ethnic minority group. They have responded by describing the immigrant situation and by expressing Asian reality both for their own community and for British society at large. In the post-colonial world where "destructive cultural encounter is changing to an acceptance of difference on equal terms" (Ashcroft, et al., 1989:36) Asian writers have insisted on these very differences. Superficially, many, if not all, texts by British Asians stress two factors above all others: race and culture. A concern with achieving a balance between the dictates of the society in which they live and the dictates of their Asian heritage features as a recurrent theme. Likewise, racial antagonism and actual physical abuse frequently figure as an essential part of life for Asian migrants in post-war Britain. While these thematic parallels clearly exist, the aim of British Asian writing is not simply to denounce racial attacks and to defend unfamiliar customs. According to the Guyanese novelist and critic, Wilson Harris, post-colonial texts all contain a seed of that particular community's ethnic experience, which, by germinating and growing in the mind of the reader will finally "crack asunder the apparently inescapable dialectic of history". (ibid., 35) Provided the Asian reality was told by

their colonial masters, non-European cultures could be dismissed as primitive oddities. Asians themselves could only be approached with caution, as the well-meaning English lady in the Oxfam shop in Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* knew only too well:

wanting to suggest to the [Indian] lady that she could have one of the better coats and with a wink and a nod the price could be adjusted but wary of wading into waters unknown for these Asians were particular about their pride; for losing face was social calamity as anyone who'd read John Masters should know. (p. 3)

Thus, before attempting to describe the reality of their community, British Asian writers are obliged to break down the received version of Indians, by no means an easy task.

Afro-Caribbean and Asian writers cannot easily avoid the subject of racism in their work because the social circumstances in which they operate are charged with 'race'. His or her colour should not be a writer's main experience in a white society as this can only be a limitation on his/her creativity, but it seems that black writers feel a moral obligation to draw attention to the racial antagonisms that, unfortunately, persist. In this respect, the Guyanese novelist and poet of Asian descent, David Dabydeen, argues that black writers should ultimately write "*out of experience, rather than from experience*" (Hand, 1994), meaning that they have to transcend the designation of 'black writer' to be simply a 'writer'. They have to overcome the many constraints imposed on them by white society in order to write, or rewrite, their own history. On the other hand, Dabydeen admits that one does have a certain responsibility to one's community and if blacks do not write about their ethnic experiences, these experiences will remain untapped, unrecorded, and, as far as the white majority are concerned, non-existent. (ibid.) Consequently, ethnic experiences feature prominently in all the works selected in this paper. Even Farrukh Dhondy, who denies that Britain is a racist country,¹⁰ cannot keep racism out of his writing. His most poignant descriptions of racism in Britain are to be found in his children's novels and short stories which he wrote while working as a schoolteacher in East London. Possibly the most moving and at the same time distressing story is "KBW", from the collection *East End At Your Feet* (1988) in which a Bangladeshi family is forced to move away from their council house flat in London's East End after continuous abuse and intimidation. "KBW" stands for Keep Britain White and is painted on their door by their intolerant neighbours. Dhondy's story is narrated by a white teenage boy, next-door neighbour to the Habib family, who makes friends with Tahir Habib, but who fails to support him when the young Bangladeshi most needed a friend. Post-colonialism opposes a monocentric view of human experience. Assimilation is rejected outright because it requires the subordination of one culture to another, the dominant one being, inevitably, that of the former imperial power. Instead, the emphasis is placed on hybridity or multiculturalism, which allows several world views to coexist but which prevents any one achieving dominance over the other. Interestingly, the growing number of British Asian writers use a number of varied discourses to transmit their ideas about the migrant experience and the new ethnic communities in Britain. Stereotypes of Indians have been handed down through a number of different genres (novels, newspapers, textbooks) and, consequently, the Asian

response cannot be limited to any one genre. Moreover, this multiplicity of discourses could almost be said to represent the multicultural character of post-colonial Britain. British Asian writers explore these two alternatives and present both the 'ideal' migrant and the 'problem' migrant as two opposing forces at work among the black population of present-day Britain.

Salman Rushdie, in particular, and in spite of its overwhelming plurality, structures *The Satanic Verses* around the duality of the migrant and his/her experience by providing two versions of virtually everything. (Spivak, 1990:43) Not only does he create two opposing characters, Saladin and Gibreel, to incarnate good and evil, and whose roles overlap and are interchanged, but he also accommodates two versions of the prophet, Mahound and Mohammed and two versions of Ayesha's story: she and her followers either drown in the Indian Ocean or reach Mecca completely dry, the waters having parted before the strength of her faith. (Bardolph, 1989:7) The fact that neither version ever achieves recognition, neither the migrant nor the 'native' is ever assumed and much less judged as the standard, (Spivak, 1990:45) can only underline the unresolved dilemma of many migrants: to translate or be translated? In a similar way, the growing ethnic community is attacking the fabled homogeneity of British culture on one of its proudest spots: the English language. During the colonial period, the language that was spoken at the metropolitan centre was the norm and any variants, such as the English that was in current use in India or even the white Commonwealth countries, were deemed inferior and were consequently marginalized. The placing of the English spoken in the South East of Great Britain on a kind of cultural pedestal has been one of the main features of imperial oppression. Through a British-oriented educational system, the language of the Empire could be carefully controlled, assuring a continued acceptance of the established hierarchy of power. Conceptions of 'truth' or 'reality' were not open to debate as the British version of colonial reality was the one transmitted to the people. (Ashcroft, et al., 1989:7-8) Part of the discourse of post-colonial writers is the attempt to overturn accepted imperial views by questioning the process by which the language has authorized the domination of black men and women by whites. These 'new' English speakers are thus challenging ideas about correct English usage in the same way that migrants have to face the challenge of a new and bewildering language. *The Satanic Verses* is an obvious textual demonstration of the migrant's, or the post-colonial writer's, "inhibition in the use of the English language," (Nair & Bhattacharya, 1990:24) which enables the newcomers to create their own variety of language, recognizable as English, but which responds to their own specificities and their freedom from the constraints of history.

A successful encounter with the language of the host country can, however, sometimes carry with it a cultural loss. The two British-born daughters of Muhammad Sufyan in *The Satanic Verses* are, according to Saladin Chamcha, not British, "not *really*, not in any way he could recognize" (p. 259; emphasis in original) and yet they fail to identify with their parents' homeland:

... Mishal confided: 'Bangladesh isn't nothing to me. Just some place Dad and Mum keep banging on about.' –And Anahita, conclusively: 'Bungleditch'. – With a satisfied nod. –'What I call it, anyhow'. (ibid.)

Saladin himself has taken on a new identity, part of the migrant's baggage:

An Indian translated into English medium. When I attempt Hindustani these days, people look polite. This is me. (p. 58)

Saladin may be the exception that proves the rule, that once the frontier has been crossed there is no turning back,¹¹ but Salman Rushdie's "multilingual project" in *The Satanic Verses*, with its "linguistic decolonization" (Booker, 1991:202) demonstrates what Yasmine Gooneratne calls

the ceaseless linguistic trading that is presently occurring between the metropolitan 'centre' and the ex-colonial 'periphery'. (1990:16)

The Satanic Verses is replete with the heteroglossia of the metropolitan city, in which Gibreel Farishta, like any migrant, "wanders through a confusion of languages. ... Babylondon." (p. 459) This new hybridized language that results from the mingling of the English language and the colonial experience does not pretend to humbly occupy a second or third rate category, but rather boldly interrogates and may even finally subvert the dominant culture. (Parry, 1991:89)

Such a resistance to a homogeneous metropolitan culture is the only feasible alternative open to the migrant, assimilation being, in the words of Peregrine Worsthorne, writing in *The Sunday Telegraph*, only possible "on our terms not theirs". (15.4.81) Migrants who are not grateful for being allowed into the country that once exploited their own have no choice but to resist, and one of the most subtle and effective ways of resistance is, of course, through language. *The Satanic Verses* and David Dabydeen's first novel, *The Intended* (1991) both outline the two alternatives available to resisting migrants: joining the mainstream culture or remaining on the margins of society. A limited access to English, as is the case of Dabydeen's Joseph, confines them to an eternal periphery, while mastery of proper English is seen to be the real passport to Britishness, and thus to the centre of power.

David Dabydeen's nameless narrator in *The Intended*¹² aspires to join the British establishment via one of its still coveted symbols of prestige: Oxford University. His desire is for complete assimilation into Britishness, but, like Rushdie's Saladin Chamcha, he is in love with an idea of Britain and not the reality of Britain. He is deluded into believing all the myths propagated by the imperial masters of decency and fair-play. He cannot see the violence and philistinism of the Britain he lives in and, like Chamcha, he repudiates his Asianness. Dabydeen has created a character that reacts against the reaction against stereotypes. His narrator does not want to assert his ethnicity in a defiant way, as perhaps one would expect from a black narrator. On the contrary, he shudders at any contact with the country and culture of his ancestors, even throwing away the chapattis and samosas given to him as a parting gift from the mother of his friend Nasim, "not wanting my Oxford room to smell with curry and spices." (p. 215)

He discovers that he feels no solidarity for Asians after visiting his friend Nasim in hospital, victim of a gang of Paki-bashers. The superiority in numbers of the white thugs does not alter the fact that Nasim has shown himself to be weak, defenceless and vulnerable. Such a display of un-English qualities turns the narrator against Nasim and all the Asian community. Whenever an Asian happened to sit next to him on the tube, he would "squirm with embarrassment" (p. 15) lest he should be identified with

such an oddity. And yet his convinced Britishness stems from his West Indian upbringing, itself a result of the colonial diaspora.

[My] shame relieved by a vague wondering as I sat next to the Asian whether I too would have been wearing a turban if the British had not taken us away to the Caribbean. (p. 17-8)

He believes that his liberation from his colonial past can only be achieved by imitating the language of his former masters. Consequently, his English betrays nothing of the Creole of his Caribbean upbringing and he equates lack of fluency in the language with inability to integrate into British society. A shopkeeper's perpetual fear of being deported on account of his mistaken interpretation of the stamp in his passport, "permitted to remain in the United Kingdom for an indefinite period", relegates him in the narrator's mind to the status of permanent immigrant:

He [the shopkeeper] would grow dismal, muttering about how English was so hard, how every word had a dozen different understandings, how he could barely pronounce the words, never mind glean their multiple meanings. (p. 124)

The narrator himself is a fully-fledged member of the official centre by his own definition:

I am no longer an immigrant here, for I can decipher the texts, (p. 195)

while his illiterate Rastafarian friend, Joseph, with his non-standardized English, shuns the centripetal forces of assimilation to such an extent that he leaves himself no choice but suicide. Joseph, whose death can be read as an apology of assimilation, represents the final incapacity of immigrants in Britain. His only survival skills are those required to force open locks, which will take him from borstal to borstal, and from a living symbol of the exotic and irrational Other to the media-created image of a 'problem black'.

When I [Joseph] was in borstal I was rumour. They look at me and see ape, trouble, fist. ... You can't even see yourself, even if you stand in front of mirror, all you seeing is shape. But all the time they seeing you as animal, riot, nigger, but you know you is nothing, atoms, only image and legend in their minds. (p. 101)

In the same way that Joseph refuses to accept the identity thrust upon him by the dominant white culture, the narrator desperately seeks to rid himself of any connection with his own native beginnings. Throughout *The Intended* he is obsessed by the perfections of the English 'race'.

I suddenly long to be white, to be calm, to write with grace and clarity, to make words which have status, to shape them into the craftsmanship of English china, coaches, period furniture, harpsichords, wigs, English anything, for whatever

they put their hands and minds to worked wonderfully. Everything they produced was fine and lasted for ever. We are mud, they are the chiselled stone of Oxford that has survived centuries and will always be here. (p. 198)

He is, however, reminded of the illusory nature of the world he is inhabiting by the constant taunts of his Asian friends. What Patel and the others see as a betrayal of his colour and his history is interpreted by the narrator as a longed for escape from

this dirt and shame called Balham, this coon condition, this ignorance that prevents me from knowing anything, not even who we are, who they are. (p.230)

He is trapped in history, incapable of transcending the text written *for* him but not *by* him. Likewise, Rushdie's Chamcha, has married Pamela, not for herself as an individual, but because of her

voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit. (*The Satanic Verses*, p. 180)

While this myth has already been destroyed by characters such as Dabydeen's Patel, who informs the narrator that

Oxford can't give you nothing man ... It's us lot who have given you everything, and don't you forget that. Oxford has only got money, but the Asian community made you rich (p. 231)

the irony of both texts, *The Satanic Verses* and *The Intended* is that the New Right in contemporary Britain is desperately trying to rake these imperial embers by harking back to the good old days when the natives knew their place and Britain was a white man's country.

What does it mean to be 'British' in the last quarter of the twentieth century? Is it possession of a passport or allegiance to a code of conduct? One can be forgiven for thinking that the only real requirement for securing a right to Britishness is the possession of a white skin. The New Right would argue that shared history is the secret ingredient behind Britishness,¹³ but whereas the Asians, and the Afro-Caribbeans, were the colonized and not the colonizers and therefore do not share the 'same' history, one might wonder whether the New Right would include the white working classes in their definition of Britishness. The less privileged people of Britain were deceived into believing that they too had a part in the Empire and its glory, and that they were innately superior to the savages in the colonies. (MacKenzie, 1990:254) It was only in the post-war, post-imperial period, which brought a greater flexibility in class boundaries, that working class Britons could claim a legitimate share in the benefits of their country. In this respect, former Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, reflects on the two-tiered nation that existed prior to World War II, and which placed the English worker on a par with his/her colonial counterparts:

I'd had a safe and easy life. I'd never seen any members of the working class and therefore didn't like them very much. Then came the war and I saw how these desperately poor and disadvantaged people fought their guts out to save *my* England rather than theirs and I've never forgotten it. (*Sunday Times*, 28 March 1982; emphasis in original)

The England that was saved did not 'belong' to the lower classes in exactly the same way that the New Right refuses to recognize the claim of the ethnic minorities to 'their' England. The discourse of class has been replaced by the discourse of race and culture, but essentially the discourse of exclusion remains the same: there has to be an easily identifiable helot class. (MacShane, 1992) Despite the fact that skin colour is a conveniently noticeable marker, even more instantly recognizable than accent, the black community and especially the Asians do not readily accept the status of permanent underclass and have succeeded in abandoning it by adhering to the basic tenets of the enterprise economy.

The myth of England that deceives Saladin Chamcha and Dabydeen's narrator has also hoodwinked many Britons themselves. Considerable effort has been devoted to creating an image of Britain as an essentially tolerant and freedom-loving country, with traditional history books emphasizing the consolidation of democratic rights together with the great military victories over a succession of foreign despots. David Lovibond, writing in *The Sunday Telegraph*, appears to suggest that this is a recent phenomenon, brought about by people's bewilderment at the occupation of Britain by unassimilable migrants:

English people have taken refuge in the past. Elizabethan 'theme' parks stand in for history, and television costume dramas provide a gilded remembrance of an older, simpler England. (Lovibond, 1989)

However, the cult of the glorious past has always been a pervasive influence in British life in that British people have been constantly reminded of the great deeds and values of former ages. The pageantry surrounding royalty lives on to satisfy "a mass emotional need" (MacKenzie, 1990:257) as well as to fill the gap left vacant by lost imperial power. Looking back to the splendours of the past instead of facing up to the stark realities of the present is to fall prey to the same kind of cultural or patriotic imperialism that has trapped both Rushdie's Saladin Chamcha and Dabydeen's narrator. Starting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a consciousness of imperial destiny was drilled into British youngsters, crossing all class boundaries to unite them with a joint purpose, and which was subsequently passed down to succeeding generations up to World War II. (ibid., 249) Whereas some social historians (e.g. Marwick, 1990) see no connection between the resuscitation of imperialism, such as in the wake of the Falklands War of 1982, and genuine national pride, it is extremely difficult to separate the two when the object of this pride is not the England of the late twentieth century, replete with violence and a general moral decay, epitomized by the abduction and murder of a two-year-old child by two ten-year-old boys in February of this year, but rather the myth of a green and pleasant land where class or racial conflicts did not exist because everybody accepted the established hierarchy. Therefore, the work of Afro-Caribbean and Asian writers has contributed to a dismantling, not only of the stereotype image that white people have of black people, but also of the

mythical image many British people still cherish of themselves, in spite of decolonization, recession and moral and spiritual decadence.

This paper has outlined a selection of creative writing by the British Asian community which challenges the very notion of Britishness in the post-colonial period by rewriting, as it were, the narrative of post-war immigration from a migrant's perspective. On one hand, it cannot be denied that their work has helped to impress upon the British the plight of blacks and Asians in a predominantly white society. On the other hand, their writing has proved to the white British how tenuous the notion of 'centre' has become in the second half of the twentieth century. In many ways they are throwing more light on the image British people have of themselves than on the attitudes of the white majority towards their former colonial subjects. Thus, the centre is clearly and irrefutably being turned inside out, but the question remains to be asked: how many white Britons have taken note?

Notes

1. By the term 'British Asian' I am referring to two kinds of people. On the one hand, I am including the British-born children of citizens from the Indian subcontinent who emigrated to Britain during the fifties and sixties. On the other hand, as far as I am concerned, those Indians, Pakistanis or Bangladeshis who have made Britain their home and use Britain as a base for their creative writing are also 'British Asians'.
2. Rushdie was recently awarded the "Booker of Bookers" for his prize-winning novel *Midnight's Children*. Moreover, excluding Rushdie himself, since 1981 when he won the award for this very novel, this prestigious literary award has been given to six writers born outside the United Kingdom, with numerous non-British authors being short-listed.
3. I am purposefully using the term 'post-colonial' with a hyphen to describe the situation following decolonization. Written as one word, the term also suggests divergent ideologies that coexisted *with* and were implicit *in* the discourse of colonialism.
4. In contrast, Ashcroft et al. claim that writers from both the black and white Commonwealth restructure European realities "not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based." (1989:33)
5. Private communication.
6. With regard to Indian writers, G.V. Desani published his *All About H. Hatterr* as early as 1948.
7. On 20 April 1968, Conservative MP Enoch Powell helped to stimulate racial antagonism by apparently voicing the fears of the British population at large. In this highly controversial speech Powell quoted one of his constituents who claimed that "In this country in fifteen or twenty years time the black man will have the whip-hand over the white man". (See (1984) Miles & Phizacklea, Chapter 3).
8. All quotations from the texts under discussion are cited parenthetically with the page numbers only.
9. "Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained." ((1983) Rushdie, p. 80)
10. Interestingly enough, Dhondy admits to having been the object of several clearly racist attacks himself. On one occasion, in March 1973, his house in Brixton was fire-bombed along with five others. However, he attaches little importance to such incidences saying that "it's almost worse in India." (Private communication).
11. At the end of the novel Saladin goes back to India, to his father's deathbed, and is thus reconciled with both.

12. For many of the points raised in the discussion of *The Intended* I have drawn on conversation with David Dabydeen at the University of Warwick in June 1992.
13. David Lovibond, in his article "Will this be the death of England?", expresses the general feelings of the New Right on this question:
 "Barely a generation ago these islands were occupied by a single people, who despite differences of region, background and expectation were bound by common loyalties and affections, by a shared history and memory. ... England is more than a matter of geography, a neutral or new-found-land belonging to everyone and no one. In this anciently settled country the English people are rooted in the land, they take their traditions from it and from the older races who preceded them there." (13.8.89).

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