Theorising Complex Diasporas: Purity and Hybridity in the South Asian Public Sphere in Britain

Pnina Werbner

This paper examines the creation of alternative diasporic public spheres in Britain by South Asian settlers: one produced through the entertainment industry—commercial film and other media—that satirises the parochialism and conservatism of the South Asian immigrant generation and highlights cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism, inter-generational conflict, family politics, inter-ethnic or -racial marriages, and excesses of consumption. The other is a conflictual diasporic Muslim public sphere dominated by Muslim male community leaders, which has had to respond to international political crises such as the Rushdie affair, the Gulf War or, more recently, September 11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the confrontation between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Seen from an indigenous British perspective, the messages emanating from these two diasporic discourses, publicised in both Western and South Asian media (cable TV and foreign newspapers in Urdu or local ones in English) are opposed, and create ambivalent stereotyped images of ‘ Muslims’ and ‘ Asians’. While a Pakistani transnational identity is mostly submerged beneath these other identities, it is in fact critical to understanding the conflicting pressures to which young Pakistanis, and women in particular, are subjected in Britain, and the clash between alienation and popular cultural ‘ fun’ marking Muslim Pakistani internal politics. These have led to the pluralisation of the diasporic public sphere.

Keywords: Diaspora; British Muslims; Cultural Hybridity; South Asians; Transnationalism

Introduction: Transnationalism and Diaspora

The newly-emergent scholarly discourses on transnationalism and diaspora take divergent yet intersecting paths. The focus of current theories of transnationalism is
on borders and the management of flows across them: of people, goods, objects, messages. To a lesser extent it is also about the flows of ideas and practices. A key point distinguishing transnationalism from the old literature on international migration is that that literature tended to assume a one-way migration to the West, and in particular the United States. The new scholarly debates on migrant transnationalism recognise the importance of a reverse process—of return, circulatory international migration and hence also the permanent condition of being a ‘transmigrant’, that is, a migrant who moves back and forth between the West and the Rest. To this extent, the literature echoes, sometimes quite explicitly (as in Basch et al. 1994: 30–1) earlier anthropological debates about circulatory migrants in Africa, moving between ethnic or tribal homelands and emergent modern African colonial cities. Because the movement of migrants is now international, however, current transnational debates also focus on the legal aspects of migration policy: to what extent dual citizenship is allowed, the rights and wrongs of trans-national marriages, or of postal voting in the homeland’s elections.1

A further emergent theme in the literature on migrant transnationals is that of communication. In the global village daily contact by telephone and email, low-cost flights, mobile phones, video conferences and faxes, all make instant communication an experienced reality for millions of transmigrants. Sojourning, as Edna Bonacich called it (1973), is now not only a permanently ambivalent way of living; it is achieved with great ease. Migrants are subject to pressures from people back home and participate in joyful and sad events as though they lived in a neighbouring town, not thousands of miles away. Moreover, remittance flows are a key feature of many national economics in the developing world.

The question of whether this intensive level of communication continues into the second and third generation, whether transnational connections and networks remain so highly personalised and embedded in some narrowly local sending context, leads to the broader issue of diaspora as a permanent condition of ethnic and communal living. Inter-personal connections may be replaced by inter-communal and inter-organisational connections and networks across borders. It is in this sense that scholarly debates on diaspora intersect with those on transnational migration.

Discussions of diaspora probe far deeper into the cultural constitution of transnational connections as an emergent reality in the place of migration. Diasporic communities create arenas for debate and celebration. As mobilised groups, they are cultural, economic, political and social formations in process, responsive to global crises and multicultural or international human rights discourses. This means that diasporas are culturally and politically reflexive and experimental; they encompass internal arguments of identity about who ‘we’ are and where we are going. Diasporas are full of division and dissent. At the same time they recognise collective responsibilities, not only to the home country but to co-ethnics in far-flung places.

The reality of diaspora is crucially both representational and material, a point argued in a recent special issue of the journal Diaspora (Leonard and Werbner 2000). Diasporas cannot exist outside representation. Yet they are materially embodied social
formations, requiring enormous investments of time, money and labour if they are to be effective as political and cultural actors in the public arena.

**Alternative Public Spheres: Purity and Hybridity**

Transnational links are by their very nature ‘hybrid’ in the sense that they are boundary-crossing connections. But settled diaspora communities are not *by definition* hybrid. The forms of cultural and social hybridity they evolve are the product of historical negotiation, the constant juggling of moral commitments and aesthetic images from here and there, now and then. A diaspora community might even be so highly assimilated into the country of settlement that it retains only a mere vestige of ‘difference’, in the form of a totemic identity flagged in order to mobilise in support of the country of origin or some other collective cause.

Like transnational trading diasporas, the existence of religious diasporas is not a new phenomenon. Religious movements—and religion in general—have never respected international boundaries. Indigenous regional cults in South-Central Africa encompass many ethnic groups across a number of nation-states, while Sufism and Christianity spread as proselytising religions, preceding as well as following Muslim and European imperial expansions into Asia and Africa. I have argued elsewhere (Werbner 2002a) that such religious diasporas expand ‘chaordically’, that is, in predictable organisational formations but without a centralised command structure. The late modern world is marked by the efflorescence of new religious diasporas (Warner and Wittner 1998; Werbner 2003).

But what happens when economic migrants from a vast region, divided by nationality, religion and language but united by a shared popular culture, cuisine, music and custom, settle permanently in a Western country like Britain? What kind of diaspora does such a heterogeneous and yet in many ways homogeneous group form? This is the question I raise in the present paper.²

The paper examines the creation of two alternative visible diasporic public spheres in Britain by South Asian settlers. The first is a resistant and yet complicit public arena produced through the entertainment industry—commercial film, novels and other media—that tells a story of cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism, of inter-generational conflict, inter-ethnic or inter-racial marriage, family politics and excesses of consumption; a cultural arena that makes its distinctive contribution to British and South Asian popular culture by satirising the parochialism and conservatism of the South Asian immigrant generation.

Second, and less exposed to the wider public gaze of ordinary Britons, is a thriving transnational popular commercial cultural sphere imported from South Asia in which Muslim, Hindu and Sikh artists, actors, musicians and producers are all equally prominent: Bombay movies, cassette pop music, Pakistani dramas beamed on satellite TV,³ Sufi devotional *qawwali* music, classical Indian music and dance, spices, jewellery, traditional clothing. This commercial culture has had little impact beyond the confines of the South Asian community but it nevertheless forms a backdrop to the satirical works produced by South Asian diasporic intellectuals in Britain.
Invisible also to most Britons is a local diasporic public sphere, almost entirely hidden from the gaze of outsiders. This is a space in which different South Asian local community leaders and activists from different national diasporic groups—Pakistani, Sikh, Indian, Bangladeshi—talk and argue among themselves, often about events back home or global political crises, while competing for power and influence in local national and religious associations (see Werbner 2002b).

By contrast to this more hidden arena, the present paper analyses the alternative hegemonic representations of diaspora produced in the national public sphere in Britain. In this wider arena, the politics of diaspora are revealed to the British public via national media, and are subject to public scrutiny not only by South Asians but also by other Britons. In being exposed to the public gaze, this national public sphere is one in which diaspora Muslims in Britain have been called upon to respond to a series of major international political crises: the Rushdie affair, the Gulf War and, more recently, September 11, the war in Afghanistan, the confrontation between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and the war with Iraq. Given the traumatic and violent nature of these confrontations, this more visible public sphere has dramatised a highly conflictual encounter between diaspora Muslims and the West as the two sides grapple with apparently intractable issues: Muslim national loyalty in the face of international conflicts, inner-city riots, arranged marriages. The debate on the morality and politics of the family and sexuality has engaged feminists, secularists, and even the British Home Secretary, David Blunkett, who argue over the limits of parental authority in making choices on behalf of their children.

According to the UK Census 2001, there are around 2 million South Asians settled in Britain, about half of them Indians (Hindus and Sikhs) and half Muslims (1 million, out of a total Muslim population of 1.5 million). Most South Asian Muslim settlers arrived in Britain earlier than other Muslim immigrant groups, who are also more fragmented nationally and linguistically. With the maturation of a second generation of British-born community leaders, Muslim South Asians, particularly Pakistanis, inevitably dominate national Islamic associations in Britain and act as national spokesmen for the Muslim community.

Most Pakistani Muslim religious leaders in Britain tend to enunciate a discourse of religious purity in which popular culture—music, dance and expressions of sensuality—is rejected as sinful and ‘Hindu’, that is, beyond the pale. Their discourse is echoed in the puritanical discourses of radical Islamic groups preaching to young Muslims in Britain, who depict British society, and particularly British youth culture, as sinful, sexually promiscuous and hedonistic, and hence strictly taboo. Yet Pakistanis, like other South Asians, love celebrating, and are active participants and consumers of their regional popular cultures. Inevitably, too, they are consumers of British popular cultural products. The new wave of South Asian novels, films, TV shows and plays, created by Muslim, Sikh and Hindu diasporic intellectuals in Britain, draws on Punjabi and North Indian popular cultural themes mixed in with British popular culture, but gives this hybrid product a critical, satirical edge, in order to advocate a liberal progressive message. Whereas the Islamic discourse advocates an exclusive, highly conservative and strictly orthodox perspective, the new wave South
Asian artistic products are thus by their very nature hybrid, impure and socially inclusive.

Seen from the perspective of British Pakistanis, then, we can say that they actively participate in the creation not of one but of two diasporic public spheres—the British Islamic and the British South Asian—even though morally, politically and aesthetically the discourses dominating these arenas appear to be radically opposed. The images and messages emanating from the two diasporic public spheres, the one impure, the other pure, are played out in front of a mixed South Asian and British audience via Western and South Asian media (English terrestrial TV stations, satellite TV, Urdu and English newspapers). Seen from an indigenous British perspective, they create ambivalent stereotyped images of ‘Muslims’ and ‘Asians’. Whereas Asians are perceived to be integrating positively into Britain, contributing a welcome spiciness and novelty to British culture, Muslims are regarded as an alienated, problematic minority: their mosques are depicted as hotbeds of radicalism and anti-Western rhetoric, in extreme cases harbouring Taliban supporters and suicide bombers. Riots in northern cities in Britain in the summer of 2001 were also reported to be mainly by South Asian Muslims.

In this public display of identities in Britain, specific Pakistani or Bangladeshi national identities are almost entirely submerged beneath the broader rubric of a ‘Muslim’ identity, just as an Indian identity (or Hindu and Sikh) is subsumed under the rubric of a ‘South Asian’ identity. Nevertheless, despite their difference, both identities label the same group. Seen collectively, diaspora Pakistanis and Bangladeshis project two alternative identities—South Asian and Islamic, although different organic intellectuals from within the two communities are actors in each of the arenas. The fact that these two identities are in tension is critical to understanding the conflicting pressures to which women and young Pakistanis or Bangladeshis in particular are subjected in Britain. The clash between Muslim Puritanism and South Asian popular cultural ‘fun’ is played out on women and young people’s bodies. The tension between the two discourses, pure and impure, is necessarily also a source of friction in British Pakistani internal politics between those espousing pragmatic integration and those articulating a more oppositional, exclusionary politics. This has led to the pluralisation of the Pakistani diasporic public sphere in Britain.

**Complex Diasporas in Britain**

The fact that similar cultural preoccupations, tastes, cuisines, music, sport, poetry, fashion and film are widely enjoyed across vast geographical regions points to a key feature of late modern diasporas (and indeed of some earlier ones) which has remained so far untheorised in the scholarly literature. The Jewish model of diaspora, often taken as archetypal, is in a critical sense misleading, because Jewish religion, culture and national political orientation (to Zion, to the memory of the Holocaust) coincide, despite geographical dispersion and despite internal religious or political disagreements. This is true also of the Armenian and Greek diasporas, each of which shares a place of origin, unique history and specific Christian liturgical tradition. But
where vast cultural regions of consumption do not simply coincide with either religion or national homelands, as is true for South Asians, Middle Eastern Arabs, Latin Americans, Africans, Afro-Caribbeans and possibly even Chinese, we may talk of complex or segmented diasporas; segmented, because members of such diasporas may unite together in some contexts and oppose each other in other contexts. Their members’ identities, in other words, are not fixed but situationally determined. In such complex, segmented diasporas the fact that people from a particular region share a rich material culture of consumption, both high cultural and popular, and sometimes a dominant religion (e.g. Islam, Catholicism) across a large number of nation-states, creates public arenas and economic channels for cooperation and communal enjoyment, which cut across the national origins or religious beliefs of performers and participants.

The South Asian regional diaspora of cultural consumption—Ghosh (1989) calls it a diaspora of the ‘imagination’—in no way determines either political loyalties and commitments or more focused exilic yearnings for a lost homeland. It is quite possible for people from a single cultural region to be locked in bitter national or religious conflicts. In the diaspora, however, the sharing of a regional culture can create cross-cutting ties and the potential for transcendent coalitions and alliances which mitigate such conflicts.

Unlike the Francophone African writers who are at the forefront of pan-African and inter-ethnic alliance politics in France (Jules-Rossette 1998, 2000), Ebron and Tsing have questioned the way novels and first-person narratives by Asian American and African American authors influence mainstream notions of discrete minority identities and communities (Ebron and Tsing 1995: 125). Such narratives are misleading, they claim, because communities which are, in reality, dispersed, hybrid and polyglot are represented in these works through culturally singular group allegories. Novels, read by mainstream audiences as authentic ‘ethnographic fictions’, have in their view displaced more complex empirical ethnographic studies. But such literary representations of minorities as separate and equivalent leaves no room, Ebron and Tsing propose, for understanding the potential for trans-ethnic coalitions and alliances.

In Britain, the very opposite seems to hold true of the South Asian diasporic popular and high cultural scenes. Trans-ethnicity obscures discrete national belongings and even religious identity. In their films and novels, British South Asian artists and cultural producers celebrate this shared cross-ethnic sensibility, irrespective of religion and national origin. But this raises the question of how representative the emergent South Asian cultural elite engaged in cultural production in Britain is.

The rupture between South Asian diasporic intellectuals and community first became evident with the beaming of a Channel 4 film by Hanif Kureishi, My Beautiful Launderette, which provoked a massive critical response from South Asians. The film depicts a gay relationship between a young Pakistani man and a white working-class skinhead lad. South Asians are portrayed in the film as corrupt and violent. But the gulf between intellectual and community became a global confrontation following the offence created by the publication of The Satanic Verses, a novel written by an author
claiming (on other occasions) to represent the predicaments of diaspora. With less dramatic results, other works in the new wave of British South Asian novels and films nevertheless also (like *The Satanic Verses*) clearly and publicly aim to debunk sacred religious or South Asian traditionalist, sexually conservative or ethnically chauvinistic values. Their overt message celebrates tolerance and hybridity, set against a background of racist Britain; a message which enables these works to reach out successfully to mainstream audiences and to a small elite of British South Asian intellectuals.

But even though their humour and novelty make these new wave South Asian artistic works commercially successful (*Bend it Like Beckham*, a 2002 South Asian British film release directed by Gurinder Chadha, had earned £11 million by May 2003, the highest grossing British-financed and distributed film ever), it is evident that the most pointed satirical barbs and critical messages contained in these works are directed much closer to home. The ‘real’ audience targeted by the diasporic intellectuals who create these films and satirical shows is their parents and peers. The motivating allegories and central plots of the new wave diasporic aesthetics send out a critical message to the South Asian community, portraying it as still locked in the obsolete and reactionary customs and beliefs of the old country. Their central subject is the sexual politics of the family, represented by the struggles of a younger, British-born generation against arranged marriages imposed by authoritarian, coercive, gerontocratic elders. The new novels and films promote images of transgressive sexuality: gay, inter-racial or inter-ethnic love marriages and illicit cohabitation, to make their point. They satirise an older generation’s profligate consumption, false ethics, superstitious religiosity, blind prejudices and obsession with honour and status.

In Hanif Kureishi’s impressive and subtle oeuvre (*My Beautiful Launderette*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, *My Son the Fanatic*) the father is, exceptionally, a figure of tolerance in an otherwise authoritarian society dominated by conservative elders. Films with similar transgressive themes such as *Bhaji on the Beach*, *East is East*, *Bend it Like Beckham*, and their American counterparts *Mississippi Masala* and *Monsoon Wedding*, or like the comic South Asian satirical series *Goodness Gracious Me* and the *Kumars at No. 42* (which won an Emmy Award), critique the struggle between generations in more straightforward terms. *Goodness Gracious Me* also satirises the love of designer goods, status aspirations and exaggerated Englishness (mainly cockney) of the younger British South Asian generation. Shazia Mirza, the iconoclastic young Pakistani stand-up comedienne, wears a black Muslim scarf and spoofs all political, religious and familial pretensions. Profiled by the *New York Times* in April 2003, and subsequently invited on a tour of the United States in May, her barbed jokes about the Iraq war and its consequences for Muslims in the West show how she weaves the familial with the political: ‘Anyone with a moustache is now a target. My mum’s been attacked’ (cited in *Eastern Eye*, 4 April 2003: 10).

In addition, an ethnic press encompasses all the four South Asian nationalities in Britain. *Eastern Eye*, a South Asian weekly, is itself a *masala* (mixture, pot pourri) of serious reports on local English and international politics, racism directed against Asians, Bombay film and bhangra stars, English celebrities, crimes of murder, rape and
assault committed by South Asians, sport (especially cricket), entertainment, readers’ letters, matrimonial columns and advertisements of clubs or disco gigs and of jobs for ethnic minorities, mainly in the state and voluntary sectors. Until recently, the chief editor was a Muslim and the journalists and columnists come from all the different South Asian nationalities. Professionally produced in perfect English, Eastern Eye’s inclusive mixture of serious politics, entertainment and South Asian celebrity gossip works amazingly well, conveying the buzz and pride of South Asians in their achievements in Britain.

Self-debunking, politically incorrect humour has been the hallmark of earlier generations of underprivileged, racialised European immigrant groups striving to prise open niches in the culture industry, particularly in the United States (see Werbner 1999). In Central Africa, barbed joking relations between ethnic groups manage ambiguous relations of conflict and cooperation in urban contexts (Mitchell 1956). Being South Asian is a racialised identity in Britain and South Asians are subject to racist stereotyping, vilification and even physical attack. To the extent that they are perceived to be ‘closed’ and stand-offish, they are also grasped as secretive and menacing. The violation of intimacy by the new wave South Asian artists, the open public display of embarrassing, internally guarded ‘secret’ ethnic truths, arguably creates a new zone of intimacy and shared understanding between South Asians and other Britons (on this see Herzfeld 1997). Humour defuses potential conflict and blunts racist stereotyping, while glossing over persistent tensions and ambivalences. The accessibility of humour across ethnic divisions enables the colonisation of public space, thus challenging existing distributions of power. Similarly, the attraction of the new satirical works by South Asian entrepreneurs to a wider British audience has allowed these young artists to carve out an increasingly prominent niche in the culture industries in Britain and to subvert racist images, even as these are apparently perpetuated.

Major BBC television annual events hand out prizes to outstanding performers and prominent public actors, the great and the good of the community. Dressed elegantly in the latest fashions, gorgeous-looking young women welcome equally young, beautiful men; they kiss Italian style on both cheeks and, reclining in BBC armchairs, chat wittily in impeccable English accents with only slight regional traces—London, Birmingham, Manchester.

This is the new South Asian elite: young, beautiful, successful, sophisticated, intelligent, elegant, trendy. Recent research by Dipannita Basu on young South Asian women in the media uncovered a wide network of such self-employed women, producers, directors. Basu writes:

In [a] well-publicised event, The Media Personality of the Year award went to Meera Syal. In presenting Meera with this prestigious award, Daily Mirror deputy editor Tina Weaver said ‘Using literature, laughter and some sharp social observation Meera has brought the lives of Asian women to the foreground and inspired us all to rethink the way we view Asian culture’. But her visibility was hardly overnight. As another young Asian film-maker noted (the writer of the film East is East), ‘Everyone thinks its now hip to be Asian, but Meera really started the ripple. People forget that she has been around
and working for years. I remember her doing stand-up when I was at drama school and thinking it was great that not only was an Asian face doing stand-up, but an Asian women’ (Rubin 1999). The road to visibility, fame and fortune, is the tip of what appears to be an increasing trend: a penumbra of relatively ‘invisible’ Asian cultural workers who are cultural entrepreneurs and producers in fields such as the media, the leisure industries, and cultural institutions and industries (Basu 2000).

Yet, despite this entrepreneurial cohort’s successful promotion of such collective representations of South Asian ‘culture’, their critique appears to have had little impact on either South Asian diasporic politics or familial sexual politics and inter-generational relations. These continue to be highly conservative and dominated by elders. For the majority of South Asians growing up in Britain marriage, kinship and religion continue to be endogamous, communally focused, trans-continental and often, once young people establish new families, highly insular and nationally oriented towards the homeland. The recent White Paper on Immigration reported relatively worrying numbers of forced and bogus transnational, intercontinental marriages among South Asians (Home Office 2002). A subsequent report commissioned by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Samad and Eade 2002) documents a tendency among some Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents in Bradford and the East End of London to try to force apparently deviant children (girls with boyfriends, boys on drugs or in trouble with the police) into rushed marriages in order to ‘save’ them, marriage being seen as guarding the proper sexuality of daughters and bringing with it responsible behaviour. Discussions of the predicaments of brides brought over from the subcontinent have added to the debate which is conducted by politicians such as David Blunkett and in the media. These have been represented novelistically, in somewhat less satirical terms, in Brick Lane (2003) by Monica Ali, another rising South Asian woman writer.9

The intentional hybridities of the new wave South Asian novelists and film makers are clearly driven, in my opinion, not so much by a sense of diasporic marginality vis-à-vis the English public, but by the desire to resist and shock an authoritarian migrant South Asian older generation and induct it into the new realities of diasporic life. Their cultural politics thus needs to be read as part of a highly conflictual internal argument with and within the South Asian diaspora itself; a dissenting discourse that has as its mission to persuade a younger generation of British South Asians to be less compliant and submissive to their parents than they currently are. In this politics of the family the message is often assimilatory: to become more anglicised, liberal and individualistic. Mainstream textual readings which focus on the dramatic representations of racism and migration in some of the films and novels (e.g. Hall 1992; Mishra 1996) fail, in my view, to identify their inner compulsion: to construct and then debunk and exorcise images of the almost mythical power of an older generation, guardians of the family and its sanctity.

The great danger of over-abstract interpretations of diasporic works is, as Bryan Cheyette warns, that ‘one simply aestheticises the diaspora so that it becomes a “great tradition” of international writers and thinkers who are beyond any historical or political contingency’ (1996: 303). Another danger is one of ignoring the reality that,
until recently, most high cultural works by South Asian intellectuals have been ultimately financed and consumed mainly by a mainstream English and a small secular South Asian elite audience. The impact of these works on the organisation of the South Asian diaspora has so far been minimal. Indeed, it may be argued that, much like Bollywood films, their artistic obsession with themes of love and sexuality in the family simply reflects a pervasive South Asian concern with marriage and familial conflict.

By contrast to South Asian popular culture, which is inclusive, absorbent, experimental, reflexively satirical and politically incorrect, rooted in bodily pleasures, sexuality and desire, the South Asian Muslim diaspora in Britain is represented by its spokesmen as socially exclusive, high cultural, puritanical, politicised and utterly serious. A brief historical view of the development of this diaspora and its transnational links is perhaps useful here.

**Islam in Britain**

While South Asian culture in Britain has been relatively innovative and responsive, this has not been the case for the transnational movement of Islam into Britain. Instead, the wide variety of different religious streams, denominations and movements evident in South Asia has been transposed into Britain almost wholesale, along with the migration of Muslims from the subcontinent. Major groups such as Tablighi Jama’at, Jama’at-i Islami or the Deobandis compete with new Islamic movements such as the al Mujahiroun or khizb ut-Tahrir, imported from the Middle East, which are attractive to some young South Asian Muslims. Most of these different groups have their own mosques. In Manchester, a city of some 30,000 Muslims, there are 22 mosques, each representing a stream, sect, nationality and city catchment area. In some neighbourhoods with high concentrations of Pakistanis, there are four or five mosques within walking distance of each other. Up until now, however, the vast majority of Punjabi Pakistanis in Britain have tended to identify themselves with the Barelvi movement. They emphasise the love of the Prophet and his continued active existence and the veneration of his ‘friends’, saints or auliya. Many come from families that are, or were, affiliated to a particular saint in Pakistan.

A major further feature of Islam in Britain is that on the whole it remains nationally and ethnically divided. Despite wishful talk of the emergence of a ‘British Islam’, even today there are Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Arab mosques, as well as Turkish and Shi’a mosques, and the language of sermons and even supplicatory prayers in the Pakistani mosques, whatever their tendency, is Urdu rather than Arabic. At the same time, children are taught to read the Koran in Arabic, and few of the younger generation of Pakistani settlers can read and write in Urdu unless they study the language in secondary schools as an examination subject. Mosque attendance among the younger generation is also a matter of choice and by no means universal, even though most youngsters remain pious and stress their Islamic identity, which they feel to be beleaguered both locally and globally.
Global Crises and the Visibilisation of Muslims in Britain

Until the publication of The Satanic Verses Muslims in Britain were a silent, apparently compliant and quiescent law-abiding minority. The diasporic public sphere which they had evolved, although critical of India, Pakistan, Arab regimes and the West, was local and hidden, invisible to outsiders. Pakistanis were locked in fratricidal factional disputes in central mosques, and divided into tiny, fragmented tonga voluntary organisations (see Werbner 2002b). It was difficult to imagine their mobilisation as a united front. The global crisis which came to be known as the Rushdie affair, with book burning in Bradford screened on TV world-wide, and the death sentence fatwa pronounced by the Ayatollah Khomeini causing a major international rupture between Iran and the West, visibilised this subterranean Muslim local-level politics into the public eye. A large demonstration in London mobilised Muslims, primarily South Asians, across the different sectarian and organisational divides.

In my recent book (Werbner 2002b) I trace this visibilisation process over a period of 12 years. Since the Rushdie affair, a series of other crises has disrupted any processes of integration into Britain and induced a sense of widening alienation. The Gulf War, Bosnia, Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, September 11, the nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, have all mobilised Pakistanis and other Muslims on to the streets of Britain, with Muslim representatives regularly invited to Downing Street and Muslim MPs openly protesting against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Historically, then, as in the case of many immigrant settler groups in the religiously plural West, Islam began for South Asian Muslims arriving in Britain in the postwar era as an acceptable incorporative identity, non-racialised, high-cultural and highly valorised. The mosque was the central locus of cultural value, the focus of communal factional politics, a point of mobilisation, a haven for incoming migrants, and a basis for solidarity in times of crisis. It provided a platform for subaltern orators and lay preachers, excluded from British formal political arenas.

Over time, as the settler community grew, there was an efflorescence of religious spaces, with the bewildering variety of different religious streams, denominations and movements in South Asia transposed into Britain. This process of replication was often associated with acrimonious splits so that by the mid-1970s, most religious groups also had their own mosques.

Importantly, this was a male-dominated process. Women created Islamic spaces in the home, and came to dominate what I called in my first monograph, The Migration Process (Werbner 1990), the inter-domestic domain—a domain of sociality, of ritual and religious celebration focused on familial, friendship and neighbourhood networks.

As we have seen, the proliferation of mosques in Britain reflected differences in nationality, language and religious tendency. The main theological divide was between the majority Barelvis, Sufi followers who endorsed the veneration of saints and the love of the Prophet, and an array of Islamic reformist groups, some more fundamentalist than others, none Islamist in the sense of espousing violent revolution.
All the groups have continued to be linked through viable and ongoing transnational networks to religious centres or saints’ lodges in Pakistan.

A further historical process which occurred in Britain was the diasporic encounter with other Muslims coming from the Middle East. This did not lead to convergence, however. Language, culture and nationality have remained a major block to the homogenisation of British Islam, despite public invocations of unity, and despite the fact that mosques are open for worship to any Muslim, whatever his or her affiliation.

This was very generally the picture of Islam in Britain before the Rushdie affair and subsequent international conflicts brought Muslims out on the streets of British cities and onto global television screens. The processes of differentiation and replication outlined here took place relatively peacefully, beyond the public gaze. Since the Rushdie affair, however, and even more so since September 11, we have seen a kind of reversal of the usual process of religious incorporation. Instead of religion being defined as a legitimate source of identity for incoming migrants arriving into an established multi-faith society, Islam has become a flag of political dissent. The growth of specifically anti-Muslim prejudice, Islamophobia, has exacerbated this process. So too has the related perception that mosques are sites of rhetorical dissent and, in a few cases, of incitement to terror. Stripped of its experiential dimensions, beyond personal belief, Islam is now an oppositional badge. We may speak of an identity-led religiosity. This has led to a serious questioning in the British press and media of the loyalty of young, second-generation British Muslims and the extent of their identification with British society.

In this context young Pakistanis, men and women alike, are increasingly adopting diacritical ritual emblems and practices which act as boundary markers, setting them apart from non-Muslim youngsters, including other young South Asians. Whereas the North Indian Islam of their parents, embedded in Sufi traditions, tended to be relatively relaxed, with veiling and purdah abandoned in large measure by the Muslim middle classes when they settled in Britain, these days the wearing by women of burqas, elaborate veils, North African-style headscarves, and of beards by men, are linked also to a total abstinence from drinking alcohol and a refusal to participate in British youth and student clubbing culture which celebrates music, dance, sexuality, drink and drugs in a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure and excitement.

Hence, the talk today by politicians is of Muslim self-segregation. This trajectory of intensified identity-led politicised religiosity is not true, as we have seen, for all South Asians. Young Hindus and Sikhs in Britain who celebrate a South Asian version of clubbing culture, and also drink, mix freely with other young people. They are secularising as they move rapidly into the middle class. There are, of course, young Pakistanis too who follow this route.

It is true that Muslims in Britain have made some notable gains in their struggle for equal citizenship, especially the right to run their own state-funded Muslim schools. The politics of dissent has challenged the state to adopt more explicitly multicultural policies. South Asian Muslims participate actively in formal British politics, especially at the local level. There are about 150 Muslim South Asian councillors and a couple of MPs (see Purdam 2001).
Nevertheless, the predicament of the Muslim diaspora in Britain has been that rather than gradual integration, with Islam accorded respect as a religion of tolerance and peace, the community has been unable to escape the stigma imposed by international conflicts with their globally transmitted images of book- or effigy-burning Muslim mobs. Conflicts of identification create tragic dilemmas for diasporas which are, by definition, transnational communities of co-responsibility. Pakistanis in Britain identify deeply with the plight of Palestinians, Bosnians, Kashmiris, Afghans or Iraqis. They see the West, and especially the United States, as an oppressor. The result has been that rather than peaceful integration, the Muslim diaspora community in Britain has had to lurch from one crisis to another, from the Rushdie affair to the Gulf War to September 11. The images of alienation these conflicts have generated have been exacerbated by the inner-city rioting of young Pakistanis in northern British towns and by the revelation that some young British Muslims had joined the Taliban. This poses difficulties for Sikhs and Hindus as well, who are often racialised as ‘Pakis’. Islamophobia thus has an impact on all South Asian groups in Britain. The diaspora was, and remains, complex, subject to fission and fusion, and not finally segmented once and for all.

It seems, then, that the politicisation of Islam in Britain challenges the view that religion mediates the peaceful integration of immigrants into western democracies as they strive to achieve equality in the public sphere (Casanova and Zolberg 2002). But against this relatively pessimistic prognosis is the fact that Muslims in Britain are, on the whole, peaceful and pragmatic. Islam is a congregational religion which provides a valued identity for immigrants. Much of it is home based, focused around rites of passage or communal Koran readings which mobilise family and friends. Even religious study groups, known as dars, which have proliferated, are held in private homes. So too, some of the smaller Sufi groups I studied have mixed male and female zikr circles. There is little or no purdah practised in homes, beyond formal etiquette. Most second-generation women move around freely, drive and work in salaried employment. They are active in their own philanthropic voluntary associations and have their own religious experts. The younger generation, both male and female, is currently entering the open job market in large numbers. For many, Islam appears to be an adventure of self-discovery, an enjoyable substitute for British youth culture.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the new-wave South Asian popular culture and reformist Islam in Britain share crucial features in common, despite their apparent difference. Both enunciate critical, oppositional discourses which attack ‘culture’, ‘custom’ and ‘tradition’. In being focused on family politics, they open up spaces for young people to assert agency and autonomy, whether they draw on liberal discourses or Islamic ones. Either way, their right to choose, to seek knowledge and stand up to their parents is legitimised. It would also be mistaken to assume (as most Westerners naturally might) that religious South Asian Muslims do not know how to have fun, just because they do not drink or play musical instruments. There is much camaraderie in religious congregations and celebrations, and young people enjoy each other’s company despite the absence of alcohol and prohibition on premarital intimacy.
Even in the public sphere, the politics of alliance rather than confrontation are also strikingly evident in Britain. In particular, the Stop the War alliance formed to protest against the war in Afghanistan in 2002, and expanded in the protests against the war in Iraq in 2003, incorporated diaspora Muslims as equal partners. The profoundly situational nature of identity as a personal badge was made evident in the emergence of this peace coalition, formed in Britain in the period leading to these two wars. Whereas in the Rushdie affair and first Gulf War, Muslims seemed apparently isolated in their support for Saddam Hussein or their endorsement of the fatwa against Rushdie, so that their Islamic identity was pitched against a Western or Judeo-Christian one, in the post-September 11 alliance politics, their dissenting views were in large measure shared in Britain with the broader constituency on the left of British politics. The Muslim Association of Britain, a federated national pro-Palestinian organisation which represented Muslim opposition to the Iraq war and unites Palestinians with South Asians, was consciously incorporated by organisations such as CND and the Stop the War alliance as an equal partner.

I decided to go with a Pakistani friend to the one million strong protest march in London in February 2003. Coaches from Manchester were packed with protesters but they were not divided by activist group, let alone along ethnic or religious lines. So too in London. We arrived as individuals and marched as individuals, two or three friends trying to stay close together and to keep an eye on previously unknown persons from the same coach, so as to be sure we could find our way back to the coach when we finally reached Hyde Park. Muslims intermingled with English activists in an atmosphere of good will as we marched through the streets of London.

The march underlined the fact that a common enemy—in this case, the American President, George Bush, and the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair—can create a new oppositional identity which is not, it must be stressed, hybrid. The identity of being an anti-war peace activist has united English and Pakistani activists, Muslims, (some) Christians, Jews and Hindus in Britain beneath a single banner. If nothing else, the war has created the possibility of such a unified identity across the religious divide.

Conclusion

We see here, then, a dialectical process at work. On the one hand Islam in Britain has been incorporative and integrative, providing a legitimate locational identity in an immigrant society; at the same time it has also generated its own contradictions and dilemmas which have inhibited the integrative process by politicising and racialising this very same religious identity.

By contrast, as South Asians, Pakistanis in Britain are increasingly part of a creative effort to produce a culturally hybrid high and popular culture which is critical, satirical and self-reflexive. The enormously positive response by an English, and increasingly global, mainstream audience has made this diasporic public sphere extremely lucrative as well as being enjoyable, integrating South Asians into British society without the demand that they abandon their consumption-based South Asian
transnational connections and orientations, although intercontinental arranged marriages are increasingly subject to political scrutiny.

The two competing cultural and discursive trajectories to which transnational young Muslim South Asian migrant-settlers in Britain are exposed have produced two equally hegemonic imaginaries, both highly visible in the public sphere. Each elicits quite different life styles, orientations and identifications to social worlds within and beyond Britain. This raises intriguing questions for transnational theory. Given the vitality and contemporaneity of diasporic South Asian culture, with its hedonistic and intellectual playfulness and wide acceptance by mainstream Westerners, can the seriousness and Puritanism of global Islam, in large measure a foreign import from the Middle East, prevail? Which identity will young Muslim South Asians embrace if and when the current tensions and stigmatisation, born out of the global confrontation of the West with Muslim societies and ‘Islamic terror’, subside, as hopefully they will?

Notes


[2] This paper draws on Werbner (2000, 2002a, 2004) and a talk given to the workshop on ‘Religion and Immigration in New York’ at the New School, April 2002. My views on transnationalism were also sharpened by discussions at workshops on ‘Transnationalism, Past and Present’, NIAS, Netherlands, December 2002; ‘Transnational Islam’, at Sussex University, January 2003; and the symposium on ‘Migrancy and its Futures’, University of Western Australia, June 2003. I would like to thank the various participants, and especially Ralph Grillo, Michael Herzfeld and Ghassan Hage, for their very helpful comments.


[4] According to the Census, there are around 750,000 Pakistanis in Britain.

[5] There are exceptions. Shaikh Zaki Badawi, an eighty-year-old Egyptian, is a key Muslim spokesman for moderation and an advisor of Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister. The Muslim Association of Britain has a strong Palestinian presence but many of the grassroots supporters are South Asians.

[6] The anthropological notion of ‘segmentary systems’ marked by situational fission and fusion was first theorised by Evans-Pritchard (1940) in his study of the Nuer of East Africa.

[7] Meera Syal is an Asian British actress, writer, comedienne well-known to the British public, Asian or not. She co-wrote and starred in the award-winning comedy, Goodness Gracious Me (in the ITV Comedy Awards) and in The Kumars at No. 42. Among her novels, Anita and Me was a runner-up in the prestigious Betty Trask Prize awards. It has recently been made into a film. Syal has also appeared in Bombay Nights, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s West End musical.

[8] Shaw (2001) and Katharine Charsley (2003) both report extremely high rates of intercontinental (over 50 per cent) and intra-caste marriages among young British Pakistanis. My own study of Sufi cults in Britain shows extensive almost daily communication with Pakistan (Werbner 2003). So too Kashmiri politics also involve extensive connections with Pakistan, and are extremely dominant in Britain, dividing Indians and Pakistanis (and Pakistanis among themselves) otherwise quite friendly, into often bitterly opposed camps (Ellis and Khan 1998).
Zadie Smith, a West Indian by origin, has also written satirically about immigrant London, including its South Asian inhabitants, in *White Teeth*, leading one South Asian to comment that Zadie Smith has said what we should have said ourselves. A 2003 film release on the shady world of asylum-seekers and undocumented immigrants in London, *Dirty Pretty Things*, highlights the greed of established South Asian immigrant-settlers employing such migrants. South Asian pop groups and singers such as Apache Indian and Asian Dub Foundation have also satirised hallowed South Asian institutions such as arranged marriages and used crossover musical genres (see Sharma *et al.* 1996).

On intentional versus organic hybridities see Werbner (1997, 2001). I argue that intentional hybridities are deliberately intended to shock, while organic hybridities emerge through unconscious, unreflective cultural borrowings.

**References**


