

Have (or how have) representations of the ethnic or national 'other' changed in post-war Britain?

In order to address this question we must firstly define what is meant by the 'other', migrants often labeled under the umbrella term *Blacks*. For the purpose of this essay it will refer to mainly Asian and Muslim ethnic communities. We will explore various discourses concerned with identity and subjectivity with particular attention being offered to issues of gender, religion and migration. The implications of the *Rushdie* affair and the September 11th atrocities will also be highlighted. Attention will be given to Enoch Powell's 1968 '*Rivers of Blood*' speech and comparisons made with the proposals suggested by current Home Secretary, David Blunkett in the government's 2002 white paper entitled '*Secure Borders, Safe Haven*'. These two examples will be used to analyse whether or not the discourses surrounding 'otherness' have in fact changed. Essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches will be compared. It will extend to illustrate examples of these discourses through visual as well as written texts and through media representation.

The key elements of Blunkett's proposals contain issues of legal migrants, asylum, citizenship, marriage/family and border controls. (Travis, 2002, p.1)

Therefore, an appropriate point from which to begin will be to firstly consider Sarup who adopts an essentialist approach when he discusses the meanings of home, borders and boundaries in relation to constructions of identity and the migrant experience. He suggests that migrants are often subjected to a plethora of opposing reactions, from hospitality to hostility, inclusion to exclusion. In order

to protect themselves, minority groups seek strength from their religion, language and culture thus uniting and confirming their collective identity. (Sarup, 1996, p.3) For example, Islam is for many British Muslims a fundamental part of their cultural identity. This is evident today, as Islam is currently the most followed faith other than Christianity. (Bunting, 2001, p.23) In *East is East*, George takes his religion very seriously, 'you're only really going to be safe if you stay within the cultural fold – if you leave it – you'll be subject to racism.' This is his justification for how he behaves, he wants to protect his family and believes they must protect their faith to protect themselves from racism. Rhanjit's mother in *Bhaji on the Beach* in the discussion concerning her son's pending divorce states, 'I cannot go to the temple anymore.' This again highlights the importance of her religion and her peers within her community. Sarup argues that according to Eva Hoffman's experience, her fragmented identity has changed and a new one has emerged as a consequence of her migrant 'journey' and exile, highlighting the anti-essentialist fluidity of identities. (Sarup, p.6) However, this appears to reject Sarup's point that identity is limited by borders and boundaries because from an essentialist standpoint identities are seen as constantly fixed. Furthermore, Sarup uses Bauman's ideas to illustrate that powerful dichotomies are used to categorise and split society, therefore the migrant who is seen as the foreigner or stranger is an 'undecidable, unclassifiable' (Sarup, p.10). In other words, s/he may be physically nearby yet culturally dissimilar, therefore constructed as the permanent 'other.' Finally, he refers to the ideas of Durkheim and Erikson that 'deviants and agencies of control are boundary-maintaining

mechanisms.’ (Sarup, p.12). He goes on to suggest that the deviant has been replaced by the immigrant, the visible foreigner, who now marks the boundaries by reinforcing his cultural identity which often leads to feelings of isolation and alienation. Hence, British culture is considered the dominant norm and others must adjust and adopt this in order to assimilate. Those that do not could be seen to be reinforcing the western fear of otherness and difference. Citizenship is discussed in Blunkett’s paper. He suggests immigrants should learn the British culture and language and marry within the U.K. (Oliver, 2002, p.1). This reaffirms Sarup’s discourse as many critics of these proposals claim that the government is trying to force British culture on to immigrants. This induces fear they may lose their own cultural identity in the process. (Oliver, p.1) This is highlighted in *My Beautiful Laundrette* when Omar and his extended family seek to achieve the entrepreneurial aspirations of the Thatcher rule in order to absorb themselves into the British way of life. Throughout the other three productions, including what we learn of Sapphire’s life prior to her death, the audience is provided with many examples of second generation immigrants attempting to assimilate into their mixed communities. All are able to speak fluent English and all, at some point in the narrative, illustrate their desire to become part of normal life in Britain. There are illicit mixed race relationships, the wish to become educated or successful in business and the wish to participate in British traditions such as going to pubs and clubs or unrestricted choice of cuisine.

If we reflect upon Powell's address to the country in 1968, he predicted that a multiracial Britain would be a disaster, 'consequence of an alien element introduced into a country ... the answers ... by stopping further inflow, ... promoting maximum outflow.' (Hall, 1998, p.15) His claim that Britain must be "literally mad" to be allowing dependants of migrants to be entering ...' (Small, 1995, p.664) is currently reinforced by Blunkett's concerns stated in his white paper, 'there has been a tradition of families originating from the Indian subcontinent wanting to bring spouses from arranged marriages to live with them in the UK.' (Oliver, p.1) Fear of the 'other' is evident here although Blunkett explains that he is not intending to ban such arranged marriages but to encourage them from within Britain and to extend the probationary period of new marriages to two years. (Oliver, p.1) Powell goes on to say 'We are on the verge here of a change ... idea of integration inaccessible to the greater part of the immigrant population.' (Hall, p.19) According to Hall, Powell believed that any form of racial mixing would contaminate the nation (Hall, p.19) Fenton suggests that the Thatcher government later discussed this fear of 'swamping by immigrants' (Fenton, 1999, p.206) emphasising the threat felt to British national identity by the introduction of new cultures. Rather than valuing the diversity other cultures bring to Britain, Blunkett suggests that he 'would not tolerate the intolerable under the guise of cultural difference.' (Malik, 2002,) Reference to arranged marriage among British Asians is made and emphasises that this stance has not changed. Blunkett stigmatises ethnic communities when he fails to recognise that many British Asians deeply oppose customs such as arranged

marriages. This refers back to Sarup's ideas on boundaries and the fear of collapse of these boundaries.

In response to Powell and Blunkett's concerns about immigrant communities being unwilling to assimilate into mainstream society, recent findings suggest that many British Muslims *do* want to integrate more. Hence they feel that perhaps their communities need to do more to absorb into this society, therefore 65% approve of Blunkett's plans for English language and citizenship tests for new immigrants. (Travis, 2002, p.1) It should be noted that these findings are the result of a telephone poll with just 500 participants, therefore not fully representative of our British Muslim communities. However, it provides an indication that not all British Muslims are opposed to full integration.

Modood appears to support Sarup's notion that the deviant is now the immigrant as he argues the rising importance of cultural racism above biological racism. Reference is made to the articulation of what Barker calls 'new racism' emphasised in Powell's speech where he suggests the incompatibility between different cultures. (Modood, 1997 p.154) Modood considers racial stereotypes and his main argument is that there are a variety of racisms but distinctions are made between black Afro-Caribbeans and Asians. As an Asian himself, Modood sums up 'that Muslimphobia is at the heart of contemporary British and European cultural racism.' (Modood, p.163) In other words, cultural racism is now about religion more than it used to be. He emphasises the importance of cultural

racism in indirect discrimination. For example, every community has its own dress codes and customs in the workplace and educational institutions and religious practices such as attending church on Sundays, yet in the West, Muslims are expected to work on weekdays despite Fridays being their day of worship. Hence, hegemony will reside with the dominant group, in Britain's case, Christians. (Modood, p.167) Parekh's study illustrates that 'respect for religious diversity imposes severe limits on the demand for cultural assimilation.' (Parekh, 1982, p.15). In other words, Parekh argues that as religion is the fundamental principle of many cultures it is insincere to recognise diversity of religions yet still insist upon cultural assimilation.

Modood supports this view, he concludes that the Rushdie affair is predominantly about the rights of non-white, non western religious and cultural ethnies in the context of a secular hegemonic society. (Modood, p.274) Modood highlights how the controversial publication of *The Satanic Verses*, with its bad language and explicit sexual imagery was considered a profane attack upon Muslims as well as evoking much misunderstanding by the West about Muslims in Britain. Yet both he and Parekh suggest that Rushdie had not intended it as an 'intellectual critique of their faith. ' (Modood, p.269) Cohen and Waldron reinforce Rushdie's claim that the book 'celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling.' (Grillo, 1998, p.232) However, Modood believes that the Rushdie Affair might actually encourage some Asian Muslim youths to 'return to the mosques and

religious classes.’ (Modood, p.271) In other words, to become fundamentalists as a reaction to *The Satanic Verses*.

It is therefore necessary to consider the ambiguous life of an immigrant which according to Parekh, often lacks ‘roots ... depth and richness,’ (Hall S, 1992, p.323) in order to fully recognise the importance of their religion in the construction of their identity. He goes on to point out that ‘their dignity as human beings is constantly mocked by the hostile “host” society; their sacred family ties are brutally snapped by evil immigration laws; their children ... return speaking a language increasingly unintelligible and even hurtful to them.’ (Hall p. 323)

Parekh argues from an anti-essentialist stance when he suggests that this results in a dichotomy of opposing reactions; either utter pessimism, suspicion or doubt of the world or alternatively, that strength, certainty and protection can be sought from the familiarity of their religion. (Parekh, 1997 p.141) Parekh suggests these two extremes were evident in Rushdie’s often metaphorical verse, ‘ he both fights them and fights for them.’ (Parekh, p.142) It could be argued that this can be seen to be happening in contemporary British society and Blunkett’s white paper reinforces this by imposing cultural, familial and linguistic requirements on immigrants. For many Muslims, their religion is the only thing that cannot be deprived of them and distinguishes them in this ‘host’ society.

Butler argues that there are generational differences between first and second-generation Asian Muslim migrants, this reflects the diverse social and cultural

influences upon them. Parents wish to preserve their cultural traditions and their principal fear is that their children 'will become westernised and abandon ... their culture ... their religion.' (Butler, 1995, p18) However, parents of migrant children are represented in different ways. In *East is East* the audience is able to witness the second generation trying to break away and integrate with both cultures. George wants to retain his Pakistani culture and forbids his sons from marrying outside this, yet is still married to a white English woman. Omar's uncle in *My Beautiful Laundrette* has a white mistress.

Butler offers a critique of the current Western assumption that many Muslim women are isolated and oppressed, especially by men and 'caught between two cultures.' (Butler C, p.19) She adopts an anti-essentialist approach as she suggests that in fact, these women do have a choice and are constructing their own categories of identity, therefore illustrating that the discourse is constantly changing and evolving. Manzoor reinforces this argument as he has also crossed boundaries and has constructed his own identity, taking elements of both cultures, as have the students he discusses in his article. (Manzoor, 2001, p. 8-21) In *East is East*, George's offspring are caught between English and Pakistani culture yet they begin to construct their own identities, adopting some western customs as well as modifying their own cultural traditions, such as speaking English, not Urdu and secretly eating pork.

In order to consider how the discourse of the 'other' has evolved it is necessary to analyse all elements that construct identity. Gender is particularly interesting because it highlights difference; generational, racial and between the sexes and how this has developed since the Second World War. Webster recognises the essentialist construction of women; the dominant image being fixed in relation to motherhood and domesticity, according to Segal 'the fixing and freezing of women as mothers and nothing other than mothers.' (Webster, 1998, p.x)

Webster highlights that against the notion that home is a safe, idyllic place it can also be a place of friction and violence. She goes on to draw differences between the idea of home for black and white women. For white women after the Second World War, life centered on domestic family life whereas it was very different for immigrant women, including white immigrant women such as the Irish. They were not considered maternal but seen as workers in low paid, low ranking jobs, (Webster, p.x) as Carby illustrates 'black women were seen to fail as mothers precisely because of their position as workers'. (Webster, p.xii)

Thus highlighting the domesticated discourses surrounding national identity. Yet many immigrant women were mothers and had been separated from their own families and children, denied any family life whatsoever. (Webster, p.37)

However, this gender discourse began to shift in the late 60s as many Asian and Muslim women were encouraged to remain within the domestic confines of the home and immerse themselves in family life. For those that did work, it was often from within the confines of the home. Manzoor points out that 'dressmaking was a common way for Asian women to earn money ... it did not

require them to leave the house.’ (Manzoor, p.54) Butler also draws on Shaw’s argument that the role of Muslim women ‘confines them predominantly to the arena of the family and home’. (Butler, p.19) She goes on to point out that it was traditional customs rather than Islamic law that confined women to the home instead of seeking work or education. (Butler, p.20) In other words, these women wish to lead a more liberated life outside the private sphere of domesticity and are seeking to create new roles and identities which will be compatible with the British way of life as well as that of Islam. (Butler, p.21)

The shift in this discourse is evident in *Bhaji on the Beach* where Asha initially epitomises everything ‘proper’ about an Asian woman, a good wife and mother and member of her religious community. Yet, in strong opposition to the traditionalist/essentialist mode of thought, the plot focuses on the conflict she feels as she rediscovers herself in the course of the narrative, illustrated in a mythical dreamlike style, she reflects ‘I went to college ... I wasn’t born selling bloody newspapers’. In an ICM Poll conducted for the Guardian in June 2002, 62% were Muslim men and only 20% of these did not believe women should be encouraged to work outside the home. (Travis, p.2) It could be argued that this represents a shift in emphasis from worker to mother back to worker. Also, that increasing numbers of Muslim women, and indeed their families want them to be more than just wives and mothers. Manzoor again reinforces the shifting discourse regarding Muslim women and the home. He discusses the young women’s intentions to attend University and establish professional careers. One

girl states ' my dad wants me to have all the things he would want his oldest son to have.' (Manzoor, p.58) Hashida highlights this in *Bhaji on the Beach*, as her father wants her to be 'the first doctor in our family.' Furthermore, Butler and Manzoor argue that many British Muslim women now choose to wear traditional dress again in order to reassert their identity. Thus, this is part of their culture that they willingly wish to retain. (Manzoor, p.56 & Butler, p.19)

Solomos and Back consider the changing discourse regarding the black presence in Britain. Their argument suggests that it has shifted in very particular ways since the second world war, from fear of miscegenation, where mixed race children were often referred to as a 'casualty of war' (Solomos & Back, 1996, p.180) to the image of the 'black mugger' representing racial crime in 1970s. Black crime shifted from against the individual to crimes against society. Peter Hulme refers to 'stereotypical dualism' where ethnic minorities were considered either as the criminals causing these social problems or as victims of racism. (Solomos & Back, p.183) These notions can be seen in *Sapphire*, where the underlying fear of miscegenation as a consequence of Sapphire's pregnancy, felt by David's white middle class family had resulted in her murder. Also, Johnny being represented as a pimp and a criminal. A further example is evident in *Bhaji on the Beach*, caused by Hashida's pregnancy with her secret West Indian' boyfriend, Oliver. Anxiety arises at the possibility of producing a child, which is non-identifiable as either black or white. Oliver would only have been accepted if

he had been Asian. In the same film, Ginda's husband is shown as a violent wife beater, which introduces a criminal element into the narrative.

If we compare *Sapphire* (1959) and *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) to more recent film productions such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and *East is East* (1999), it is evident that representations of the 'other' and the way stories are told have changed in the discourse of film and cinema over time. Underlying themes of race and prejudice run through these films. *Sapphire* adopts a modernist approach, which responds to the ethnic tensions, which were erupting in Britain in the late 1950s. It places an essentialist focus on racialism, which is highlighted in the Tulip Club scene, with references to black people and rhythm. Released in 1985, *My Beautiful Laundrette* was groundbreaking in its explicit representation of issues such as hybridity and homosexuality. It offers an anti-essentialist approach by enabling the audience to consider the evolution of new, dynamic, mixed cultures, with much emphasis on hybrid identities especially with regards to Omar and Johnny's homosexuality. *Bhaji on the Beach* offers a postmodernist mixture of genres within the narrative and offers more resolution at the end, than *Sapphire* does. Finally, *East is East* is a comedy, its focus being the family and conflict within as well as outside it. It adopts the postmodernist model with its acceptance of different ideas and acknowledgement that it is a chaotic and messy world although it could be argued that this film offers a softened, rosy view of life for an ethnic family in the 1970s. When looking at fictional films it is necessary to bear in mind that they are never going to be fully

representative of reality. However, it is evident that these films use different discourses and place them in narrative form to make them more powerful and perhaps more understandable, than a documentary would.

Having considered film representations of the other it is necessary to consider the impact of the media. Osgerby points out that the 'media responses to 1958 'race riots' ... drew together a powerful blend of fears and stereotypes.'

(Osgerby, 1998, p.121) In other words they implied that this violence was the result of an 'alien' presence in Britain due to immigration and the only means of counteracting this lay with tighter immigration control, pre-empting Powell's predictions and later, Blunkett's proposals. The British media provide its audience with many negative connotations of the 'other' by creating exaggerated and inaccurate impressions of non-Western societies. (Phillips, 2002, p.10)

According to Butler, the media intimate that 'Islamic fundamentalism' will threaten the foundations of British Society. (Butler, p.18) Modood highlights how in the aftermath of the Rushdie affair, the media's language was utilised by groups such as *Women Against Fundamentalism* which 'reinforced a racist stereotype of Muslim fundamentalists.' He asserts that there is only a small minority of British Pakistani fundamentalists. (Modood, p.270)

In the popular and news media, representation of the ethnic 'other' has increased, certainly in recent years, in light of the Stephen Lawrence murder and the September 11th terrorist attacks on the West. Following the attacks in the

United States Manzoor points out that a subsequent media portrayal of Luton clearly illustrates how the media can distort interviews. (Manzoor, p.57)

The face of contemporary Britain has been changed considerably by immigration and within society; local, national and ethnic identities are being blurred. This essay has explored ways in which representations of the migrant 'other' have evolved in post-war Britain and consideration has been offered to constructions of elements of identity such as gender, religion and migration. With regards to gender, the relationship between feminism and Islam has now changed.

Contrary to western belief Muslim women do in fact have a choice in how they construct their identities. Many women's movements are being established which, highlights how these women are now becoming educated and liberated as opposed to wearing the veil and staying at home. In the light of September 11th, many Muslim women are adopting the traditional dress code again, out of choice, in order to reassert their identity in times of uncertainty and fear.

In relation to religion, the discourse relating to Islam in western society began after the publication of the Satanic Verses and this growing fear of the Islamic world has again heightened following the September 11th atrocities. The ramifications of these terrorist attacks on the West will rumble for many years and the Asian Muslim communities are finding themselves under the critical gaze of the white western population. Muslims are now subjected to unprecedented levels of racial and religious abuse. The recent Guardian/ICM research poll

confirms the high level of Islamophobia in Britain. Many Muslims believe that the British public sees them as a separate entity within mainstream society. (Kelso & Vasagar, 2002, pp.1-2)

This highlights how the West versus Islam discourse has shifted as an awareness has emerged that there is a body of people who exist, who have previously been considered the invisible 'other'. It could be argued that there is now a real threat that these communities have the power and the technological tools to take over and possibly destroy the Western world.

On the whole, films such as those mentioned here have attempted to change representations of the 'other' and raise awareness of the contradictions, conflicts and concerns faced by the immigrant population in this country. Hence provide us with an insight into what it was like to be British and Asian at particular times in British post war history. Moving on to the media, who have played a key role in the creation and dissemination of 'otherness', as previously discussed. They increasingly feed negative and biased images of Asians and Muslims to their British audience and this problem appears to be growing, exacerbating the threat felt by the West.

Clearly, the concerns raised in the public and political arena by Powell in 1968 and Blunkett at present indicate that politically things appear to have changed little for the ethnic minorities. They are still considered outsiders, to reiterate

Sarup's terms, 'foreigners' or 'deviants'. (Sarup, p.12) In their quest for assimilation and social cohesion the Government appear to be creating stronger divisions within society, whilst recognising difference they are doing little to accept or value this and continue to impose their hegemonic ideology onto our immigrant population. Younge suggests ' Today, racial discourse is shifting back to ... culturally uniform British identity in which non white people's presence is tolerated and even then, only conditionally.' (Younge G, 2002 Guardian) Thus, representations of the ethnic other have indeed shifted but the question remains as to whether this discourse, which is constantly evolving will actually benefit or continue to marginalise these communities within British society. Only time will tell.