

Commentary

Marginalisation, Resistance and the Road to Fictional Visibility

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In 1967, I was a little boy who migrated to England from a little village in Pakistan. Even before my bones adjusted to the Northern English cold, I had been transformed into a Paki and a wog, in the violent streets and in the playground at school. Along with many others, I resisted the racism into which I was thrown. But the life I lived was not the representation of my life that I read about in the newspapers, or saw on the television in 'faction' or fiction. A part of this reality I sought to change by writing myself.

Whilst racism was the overriding experience which propelled me towards writing, it was the works of writers such as *Maxim Gorky*, *Richard Wright*, *Robert Tressell* and the progressive poets from Pakistan, such as *Habib Jalib*. Whom in their own lives, had participated in movements, in body or in spirit, to change the world in the lived, who provided me with an anchor in which to situate myself. At the time of writing, I came across no literature set in Britain, which placed at its core, the experiences of those who were actively fighting back to state or street racism.

When I started writing my first novel in the winter of 1981, on the remand wing of Armley Jail in Leeds, my personal life, as well as the world around me, was in turmoil. Afghanistan had been invaded by the Soviet Union, and Pakistan was under the US supported military dictatorship of General Zia (who was flogging people in public in the name of Islam). Ronald Reagan, the US President, was singing the praises of the Jihadists of the time, while in the UK Margaret Thatcher had already unleashed a wave of racism with her speech about the country being 'swamped' by immigrants.ⁱ In response, the streets of Britain erupted in a youth rebellion on 11 July 1981, in which I was one of the many thousands arrested. I was initially held on public order offences and later on in the month arrested again, this time on charges of conspiracy and the possession of explosive substances, in a case that became known as the Bradford 12.

It was when I was awaiting trial on these charges of terrorism in the summer of 1981, in a top-floor cell in the jail, that I wrote the first words of my first novel *Hand on the Sun*.ⁱⁱ I later completed the first draft, in a high-rise tower block, in which the only furniture was a

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mattress, an old typewriter and a camping stove for cooking. By this point I was out on bail, with conditions that forced me to leave Bradford and live in the West Midlands, and be under curfew between 7 pm and 7 am. Most frustrating of all, I was not allowed to go near any demonstrations or public meetings. Interestingly, I did not know at that time that I had actually written a novel. I simply thought that I was writing down 'stories' and one of the main changes between this first draft and the published novel, is that the cast of characters was slimmed down considerably. Jalib's mother, for example, was an auntie in the first draft until a friend pointed out that the mother and auntie were in fact the same character, performing much the same job in the novel. It was when I merged these two characters that I felt I had the makings of a novel. However, I still did not know what to do with the book even once I had done this. This was where fate intervened. I was reading a Penguin book at the time and simply telephoned Penguin in London, and asked them if I could send it to them. As luck would have it, I was put through to the office of Neil Middleton, the commissioning editor for fiction. Someone asked me to send a synopsis along with the novel. I asked, in my naivety, "What is a synopsis?" How this person kept a straight face when explaining the nature of a synopsis to me I can only imagine, but I sent the novel in and it was accepted as a result of Neil Middleton's personal intervention, something I only learnt about years later. It is important to note, however, that my experiences of prison did not feature in this novel but, instead, became the opening lines of the second one *While There is Light*ⁱⁱⁱ published some twenty years later.

Before *Hand of the Sun*, I had experimented with other forms of writing. The first creative piece I worked on was a co-authored dramatic script, entitled *Land of Hope and Glory*. It was lost and never saw the light of day. The play remained unfinished, partly because my co-author, Marsha Singh, and I could not agree on an ending. I wanted to end it with a riot while my friend wanted something more conciliatory. Both of us were the founding members of the Asian Youth Movement,^{iv} an organisation which featured prominently in my first novel. Marsha Singh later became a Member of Parliament for Bradford. It is this lost piece that, in a sense, resonates in my writing today, for it sums up both the disappointment of what I found when I first arrived here in the UK, and also the story of my own rebellion. The rebellion of my writing against the system and the ideology that produced me and the country in which I ended up. Before coming to the UK I had like thousands of other immigrants, imagined it as a land where the streets were paved with gold. But when I got here, I found no streets paved with gold, but instead racists and fascists who reminisced about their lost '*Land of Hope and Glory*'.

If convicted of the charges of 1981, I was facing life in prison. I had ended up in jail following five to six years of sustained political activity, primarily for resisting racism. Sitting in my cell at night, I used to look out of the bars and ask myself, what would happen to all those experiences we had? Would they be washed away in the tidal waves of history? Forgotten, or at best recorded by some academics, as an example of the wayward rebellion of children of first generation migrants - the 'children of aspiring shopkeepers', as many of us were often cast at that time. The members of my own family were industrial workers, as was almost everyone else I knew. Looking back, I can therefore see that what motivated me to begin writing was a desire to 'bear witness' to the times, and like many other authors before me, to

at least *attempt* to 'set the record straight'. I am aware that there is now a vast amount of academic literature on this subject, but it would also appear that more of it is focused on the Nazi anti-Jewish extermination campaigns in Europe, or the subjugated history of slavery, than on the testimonies of colonial migrants (see, for example, Felman and Laub's *Testimony*, from 1992).^v A significant number of novels have now been written on the trials of migration to the UK, but the scholarship has only been recently catching up (see, for example, Bromley's *Narratives for a New Belonging* (2000)).^{vi} Some recent academic texts, which do deal with my own novels in this context, include an essay by Sean McLoughlin^{vii} and James Procter's *Dwelling Places* (2003).^{viii} In his chapter on 'The Street', Procter locates my own 'semi-autobiographical' texts within a shift towards 'documentary' realism within the black and Asian writing community, on the grounds that this was the form most suited to the political needs of the times:

"Brathwaite's call for a new politics of representation anticipated a commitment to politics in black British writing that would prevail across the 1970s and early 1980s. Like film over the same period, literary discourse turned to realist modes of representation in order to redefine what Mercer refers to above as the 'referential realities of race'. Where black film turned to the genre of documentary realism, literature was dominated by autobiography as a discourse of documentation, a genre that privileges the realist conventions of immediacy, transparency, authenticity and authority [. . .]. Meanwhile, in South Asian writing, Tariq Mehmood's semi-autobiographical account of the Bradford Twelve (of which he was a member), A Hand on the Sun (1983), articulates the politicisation of Pakistani school-leavers and factory workers in the north of England. In very different ways these narratives intervened in dominant representations of black people at the time by (as Paul Gilroy put it within the context of insurrection) 'defining themselves'. They exploit the authority and transparency of autobiographical discourse in order to 'tell it how it really is'."

(Procter, 2003, p.94)

Whilst it appears that Procter, when referring to *Hand on the Sun*, had not read my novel, for it was *not* an account of the Bradford 12, nor a story about the politicisation of Pakistani school leavers, his comments mark the emergence of an Asian consciousness in the UK that transcended the national and geographical boundaries of South Asia. What was emerging was a new identity that could only be forged here in the UK, one that was coming out of a common history of facing racism, and more importantly, resisting it. It was this resistance that would bring into being a new 'black' identity for South Asians, where black was a *political* colour that could only exist in a white world, and where both colours were not to be found together in nature. At the time of writing *Hand on the Sun*, I was well aware of the usage of fiction by black American writers, such as Richard Wright (especially his *Native Son*),^{ix} to locate the reality of the hostility of racism in their lives through literature. However, what is relevant are the last few words in the quote above, in so far as the desire to '*tell it how it really is*' really was the key motivating concept for me in writing the first novel.

At the time I started writing *Hand on the Sun*, I had not yet passed 'O' level English, could not spell very well, and had little understanding of grammar, let alone the technical skills of how to write a novel. But the stories of coming to Britain, of forced separation from my mother, of victimisation at school, of racist violence at school and on the streets, and my involvement in the resistance movement, continued to flash through my mind. I had no understanding of plot, character, dialogue or any of the techniques of novel writing, but I knew I had an important story to tell. Part of me felt ashamed of this lack of education, but I had *lived* these events and I wanted to write about them. Both the desire to 'bear witness' and my frustration at not having the skills necessary to produce work that could be published were felt keenly.

At the time of writing *Hand on the Sun*, I did not understand what 'character' was or what the structure of a novel was. What was important to me was simply to 'get the stories down' before they were lost. The descriptions of schooling, the graffiti on the walls, and the violence of the playground were all based on what I recalled from my own schooldays. Most of the characters were, to a degree, born of the requirements of the story. I made no attempt to weave the story together, or to develop the characters, since apart from anything else I did not know *how* to do so. It is therefore not surprising that Sivanandan compared the style of *Hand on the Sun* to the 'oral tradition of the storytellers of the Indian subcontinent, in the tradition of the panchatantra'.^x In these stories there is no plot: one story exists because of the next (it could exist without it) and yet it lives in its own world, with its own compact unity of time, space and moral. However, the sum of all the stories is crucial since this not only makes sense of the totality, but also gives greater meaning to the minutiae of the individual stories. Just as the oral storytellers can see and interact with their audience, at the time of writing, in jail, and indoors under curfew, I was interacting with my primary audience, my friends with whom I had lived, and from whom I could soon be separated if found guilty. Indeed, it was *for them* I was primarily writing, since I did not know then that I would be acquitted. I was looking at two life sentences for the two charges of conspiracy to cause explosions and endanger life, and 14 years' for the possession of explosive substances. I imagined my friends reading the stories, in which they had lived, events in which they had participated, struggles they had waged, and conflicts they had had to partake in. On the one hand, I was trying to tell them snippets of their own past; on the other, I was trying to leave a record of the formation of our organisation. In jail, I thought back to how I had not come across a literature that reflected the experiences I had lived. Whilst I had come across literature from Africa and America that talked about the experiences of black people in a white ruled world, my own experience, and that of my friends, was nowhere to be found.

As noted earlier, I started my first novel whilst on remand in Armley Jail in Leeds. This was a story of second generation Asian youth; children of post World War II migrants who had grown up in Britain. When I started composing the characters, I wrote down the real names and descriptions of people I knew, who were becoming characters in the book. These characters were at once different facets of myself and portraits of those I knew. In the beginning, I struggled both with the question of the characters and the story. For me, the story was always more important, but without the characters there was no way of telling it.

As discussed previously, the novels central storyline is narrated through a series of connected tales in the third person. Short stories almost, of life at school, at work, at home, stories of love and culture, with the narrative being held together through the simple device of Asian youth coming together, in the spirit of resistance through the birth of a new political organisation.^{xi} Jalib, the main protagonist of *Hand on the Sun*, is an 'angry young man'. He learns through the pain of battles in the playground that he can stand up to white boys. He had imagined that the white man was all powerful, but when he strikes back at a white bully in the playground, the white boy bleeds: his blood is red and, like Jalib, he does not like to feel pain.

This is an autobiographical reflection of incidents that had happened in my own life. At first, when I used to get bullied by white boys I was petrified of even the puny ones. I had come to England aged around nine and had grown up on exaggerated stories of the power of the white man. It sounds ridiculous now, but when I had first seen the white boy bleed I had thought that this could not be a *real* white boy, his blood was red! Like myself, Jalib had expected the UK to be a land paved with gold, a 'free country,' which is what so many of our elders used to say, notwithstanding the general belief that the white man was to be feared and looked up to. However, Jalib quickly became just another 'Paki': the world he enters is not a land paved with gold but rather the run-down inner-city ghetto of a small northern town where his family has been enslaved to old textile machines in the decaying cotton mills, and white gangs hunt him at school and on the streets.

I tried to bring different aspects of the life that my friends and I lived during this period into the story, but the experience of racism and resistance soon came to dominate both the story and the characters in it. This is well summed up by Sivanandan:

"Racism is the only experience that Jalib has or is allowed to have. It is his over-riding consciousness. Even his love for Shaheen, though conducted to the tune of his culture, is distorted by the tempo of racism. And it's only through his struggle against racism, his struggle for another reality, that Jalib gains a deeper understanding of duty and comradeship and love. Only through defending himself and his friends against racist attacks does he appreciate the value of comradeship. Only through defending his community against the incursions of the National Front do Jalib and his comrades understand the quality of duty. Only in the heat of battle do they learn to honour Dalair Singh, the veteran of many battles against the British Raj, and arrive at an understanding of the continuum of the struggle to learn to 'make our history into a weapon' [. . .] Shaheen too, is formed in the crucible of her people's struggle against racism. When she first balks at an arranged marriage to her cousin in Pakistan, it is because she wants to be free to choose when and whom she marries and because she has seen how Britain traditional marriages had locked women like her mother and Jalib's mother within the four walls of their homes and left them prey to loneliness and despair. (They were afraid to go out and missed the company of women with whom they

could 'sit and talk, laugh and joke, plot and plan'). And yet she cannot run away: she owes her parents a duty and her younger brothers and sisters a guiding hand. But her personal problems begin to fade when little Malkit is savaged by skinheads and she determines to join the fight against them. 'It's no bloody good just eating ourselves up when these skinheads, coppers and others are doing so much wrong to our folk.' She had earlier 'seen her problem in isolation; now she was beginning to see it in relation to other people.' And through that she arrives at a higher duty, a duty to her people, a political duty and a resolution to her problem. She owes it to Maqsood to marry him so as to gain him entry to Britain, but she owes it to herself not to stay married." (Sivanandan, 1983)

Religion and Character

The religious background of the characters was of central importance in pegging both narrative and characterisation in *Hand on the Sun*. The second paragraph of the novel refers to the religious education teacher, here I tried hard to incorporate the debates of the time directed at the migrant population, namely that they *must learn to integrate*:

"The religious education teacher read out his sermon. There were some, he thought, as he looked on the few blacks who stood in with the boys, who saw sense. They must learn to integrate. They must learn to accept that they are in our country." (Mehmood, 1983, p.9)

There were, indeed, many occasions during which I clashed personally with the religious education teacher at school. As here, the debates were less theological and more to do with the fact that I found it hard to accept that Jesus Christ looked like an unshaven father of some of the white boys, especially those who were often attacking me. I had always thought of him as an Arab, and not a blue-eyed blonde. At this stage in my upbringing, religion was less to do with faith and cultural difference than white hegemony in the name of Christianity.

Minor Characters and secularism

The names of all the minor characters in the novel, such as Mohan (Hindu), Ranjit (Sikh/Hindu), Malkit (Sikh), Dalair Singh (Sikh, meaning Brave Lion), Shaheen (Muslim, meaning an Eagle), Maqsood (Muslim, meaning 'purpose', i.e. the purpose of achieving a better life), Jalib (Muslim, meaning the cause/ motive) and Hussain (Muslim, and referring to Imam Hussain), were representative of the different religious communities of South Asia. These names reflected the secular, multi-ethnic nature of the friendships that I, and others, built whilst growing up in Bradford. Something that would not have happened to those of us from Pakistan and Kashmir had we not migrated to Britain, since the partition of the subcontinent had been done on communal grounds.^{xiii} Moreover, as indicated by the short translations offered above, the names were also of symbolic importance, with the naming of characters such as Dalair Singh, Jalib and Hussain designed to represent ancient traditions of courage, purpose and rebellion.

This said, many of the characters in *Hand on the Sun* were based on ‘real life’ personalities. Dalair Singh, for example, was based on an old Indian worker who lived in a small two-up, two-down in Bradford 3. The word ‘Dalair’ means brave, and in choosing this name for the character I was trying to allude to the courage needed in old age to keep alive the struggles of one’s youth when dealing with a new era, a new country and a new generation of comrades. This man was our living connection with the anti-colonial struggle of the past, and he was able to relate many a tale of his youth to us.

Hand on the Sun was written at a time when the textile industry, which had enticed the ancestors of the characters of the novel to Britain, was in its death throes, causing mass unemployment across the generations. Dalair Singh not only represented the connection with the anti-colonial struggle against British rule in South Asia, but he was also a former mill worker and in this he was a living link with the industry that employed many of the characters of the novel. As will be seen in the following extract, his life is both a symbolic and an emotive point of reference for the younger generation.

“Dalair Singh moved slowly along the pavement. Old age had robbed his eyes of almost all sight . . . All around him he felt the society he had fought, moving, throbbing, buzzing with life . . . Even with his body a mere shell, awaiting the inevitable embrace of death, his spirit of rebellion and his will to resist surpassed that of the young.” (Mehmood, 1983, p.86)

Although, on the surface, my first novel appears to be very autobiographical and motivated by a desire to ‘bear witness’ to the times as accurately as possible, there are also a number of significant literary influences that both feed into the characters (their aspirations and ways of seeing the world), and the general ‘vision’ of the novel. For although *Hand on the Sun* clearly is committed to an ‘authentic’ and realist representation of Bradford in the early 1980s (see Procter above), it is not without certain idealism. Like most working-class or otherwise marginalised literatures, it has a commitment both to telling the truth *and* to reshaping the future (see Georg Lukacs’s ‘classic realist’ formula).^{xiii}

Along with the other 11 defendants, I was acquitted in the Bradford 12 case. I set this experience as a backdrop to my second novel *While There Is Light*. But by the time of its publication, the Paki of the 60s and 80s had been transformed into a Muslim, his religious belief or practice being irrelevant. Thought at the time of writing, the religion of my characters in the second novel was incidental, the perception from their names, meant that if my character had a Muslim name, then he had to be described as a Muslim. Mike Phillips writing in the Guardian said:

“The novel opens with a sentence from a letter written by Saleem, a young Muslim on remand in Leeds. “Mother, I am now in jail, in this bitch of a country called England.”

This was an indictment of Britain of the 1970s. As we grew into adults, and the generation

before us became elders, the myth of the land ‘where the streets were paved with gold’ faded and those who had planned to come here for just a short time, in order to raise enough money to help their families and then go back home, began calling Britain a ‘sweet jail’. Our worlds became ‘*neither here nor there*’. Where we came from and where we were now were separated by a gulf equivalent to the thousands of miles that separated England from the subcontinent. Families were defined by feelings of insecurity, longing, loss, and un-belonging, and also had to face up to the prospect of becoming long-term objects of hate: ‘Pakis’, ‘black bastards’, ‘immigrants’. Meanwhile, on our visits back ‘home’ we had also become strange and alien. To the people in our villages we were now ‘*abroadis*’: white, wealthy, transient VIPS – not of ‘there’, but ‘*here*’ (that is, Britain). This family resentment towards our new world is well captured in the words of the title of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poem, ‘Inglan is a Bitch’.^{xiv}

While in my previous novels I have challenged the concept of terrorism, by presenting the ‘terrorist’ as a hero in a liberation struggle, in the new novel *The Song of Gulzarina*, the central protagonist is living in a very different world. Terrorism is now no longer bound by time and space or the specificities of local histories but has become, in the eyes of the West at least, a global phenomenon perpetrated mainly by Muslims. Consequently my central protagonist, Saleem Khan, is no longer based upon a historical figure like Udam Singh but is, instead, an ordinary man driven to a desperate act. A retired factory worker born in 1940, Saleem migrates from Pakistan to the UK in 1965 shortly after the Indo-Pakistani civil war, and then returns to Pakistan just after the start of another war in 1971, and then again in the 1980s during the period of Soviet occupation. After each of his journeys back to the UK, Saleem is struck by the relative tranquillity of life in Britain. However, during this thirty-year period, his place within British society has changed drastically. Where once he was simply a ‘Paki’ now in the first decade of the twenty-first century he is a potential Muslim terrorist. Both the never-ending nature of wars in his homeland in the previous century and the global ‘war of terror’ that has come to define this posed a dilemma for me as a writer. What narrative structure would best enable me to tell the story of Saleem Khan whose whole life had now been defined by wars of one kind or another? Related to this question was how I could best develop the character to bear the weight of this epic story.

Endnotes

ⁱ TV Interview for Granada World in Action (“rather swamped”), 1978. Margaret Thatcher Foundation [online] Available at < <http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/103485>> [Accessed 3 October 2010].

ⁱⁱ Mehmood, T., 1983. *Hand on the Sun*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mehmood, T., 2003. *While There is Light*. Manchester: Comma.

^{iv} The Asian Youth Movements sprang up in a number of British cities during the 1970s and survived until the mid-1980s.

^v Felman, S., and Laub, D. eds., 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. London and New York: Routledge.

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- ^{vi} Bromley, R., 2000. *Narratives for a New Belonging*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- ^{vii} McLoughlin, S., 2006. Writing a British-Asian City: Race, Culture and Religion in Accounts of Postcolonial Bradford. In S. Sayyid, N. Ali, V. S.Kalra, ed. *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain*. London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, pp.110-49.
- ^{viii} Procter, J., 2003. *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- ^{ix} Wright, R., 1993. *Native Son*. New York: HarperCollins.
- ^x Ancient collection of fables, from around 500 AD, generally attributed to Vishna Sharma.
- ^{xi} The Youth Movement in *Hand on the Sun*, as a concept, was born out of my own involvement in the formation of the Asian Youth Movement mentioned earlier.
- ^{xii} The South Asian subcontinent was divided into Pakistan and India in 1947 at the end of British rule, with a Muslim-majority Pakistan and a Hindu-majority India.
- ^{xiii} Lukacs, G., 1962. *The Historical novel*. reprint ed University Press Nebraska.
- ^{xiv} Johnson, L. K., 2006. *Selected Poems*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

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