RACIST AND XENOPHOBIC ATTITUDES IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FICTION BY AUTHORS OF SOUTH-ASIAN ORIGIN

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Abstract

This article considers different types of racist and xenophobic attitudes as presented in some postcolonial novels written in English by authors of South-Asian origin, such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Meera Syal, Hanif Kureishi, Hari Kunzru or Monica Ali. The causes include Darwinist explanations of skin colour and inferiority of the darker races, which constituted the basis for their colonial conquest by the white race (who had this "burden" to carry) to the postmodern cultural constructs of the Other as different and therefore dangerous. Several instances of implicit and explicit racist and xenophobic attitudes and actions as they appear in the novels are analysed, together with the types of response received, which ranges from exacerbation of religious attitudes to direct acts of terrorism.

Keywords: postcolonial novels, constructs of the Other, implicit and explicit racist and xenophobic attitudes, communalism

Introduction

A special type of individual violence exposed in the novels by authors of South-Asian origin is directed against the Other, which leads to the general impression of an extremely violent South-Asian society. The characters' destinies seem to be constantly violated and thus distorted, or as a line in *Midnight's Children* goes, "Nothing comes out right in life (…) unless it's forced out" (Rushdie, 1984: 129). Among violations of the Other, the most prominent are those caused by racism: discriminations based on race or aggressiveness due to skin colour or ethnicity; verbal or physical abuse are often present in the novels by South-Asian authors. The reverse is also present, that is the fanaticism and the extremism of the immigrant population, sometimes incapable or simply unwilling to adapt to the realities of the host country.

Why racist?

Be they Darwinist explanations of the skin colour and the inferiority of the darker races, or the more modern concept of ethnicity and the cultural constructs of the "Other" as opposed to the known and comfortable "Us", different therefore dangerous, racism in British postcolonial society seems to be on the forefront of some of the novels' plots.

In the colonial time, the necessity to construe the Other as inferior, or childish (as the character standing for General Reginald Dyer says in *The Impressionist*, "Ethically, the dark-skinned races are like children". Kunzru, 2002: 183) found support in the so-called scientific method of craniometry: "It turns out that through the incontrovertible methodology of science, craniometry has revealed the foundation of British imperial domination of the world" (Kunzru, 2002: 196).

Reverend Macfarlane, a hypocritical supporter of these theories who nevertheless finds pleasure in the occasional paid sex with local prostitutes (or with a local servant girl with whom he even has a daughter), uses Pran/Ruksana/Robert/Bobby/ Jonathan to measure his brain and his skull, and to demonstrate the superiority of the Europeans over the rest of the world, and therefore to provide the "rational" argument for their colonisation:

> *At the top is the European, whose capacious 100-cubic-inch capacity gives him room for brain development far in excess of such benighted fellows as the 91-inched Peruvian or the savage 86-inched Tasman. Hence, Empire* (Kunzru, 2002: 197)

The desired scientific effect is lost as the Reverend himself finds that Robert is closer than expected to the size, skin colour and intelligence supposedly restricted to the superior race: "To the Reverend his fine nose and thin, sharp lips appear strangely pure. For a mongrel, incredibly pure. Really almost too pure. Almost European." (Kunzr,u 2002: 197). In spite of the "unusual leucochroicity of the subject's skin", or of his brightness (he is "even brighter perhaps than Duncan at that age. Certainly brighter than Kenneth [his two dead sons]". Kunzru, 2002: 198) the Reverend seems to believe that "Robert's peculiar disguised form of hybridity might conceal all manner of antisocial tendencies" (Kunzru, 2002: 198), which the Italian anthropometrist Lombroso believes are signs of criminal types. The reverend seeks scientific answers to punish his debased self: as a young missionary he fell to the sinful act of having a child with a local woman: "Andrew Masfarlane of the Leucodermi. cymotrichous of hair and mesocephalic of head, had coupled with Sarah of the Xanthodermi, exotically leiotrichous but woefully brachycephalic. Their daughter was a collapse. A blur" (Kunzru, 2002: 230). The attempted scientific vocabulary and the repeated quotations from books dealing

with anthropomorphic measurements of the different "races" are used to emphasise the so-called truthfulness of such theories; of course, Kunzru's subtle irony cannot escape the contemporary reader.

While in colonial times construing the Other as morally and culturally inferior, and also visibly different through the category of "race", was based primarily on "scientific" arguments, in postcolonial British society, this is a more challenging activity. For how could one safely condemn the Other to an inferior position, what could be said to argue for it? Especially when the so-called "marginal people" come into a historical or ethnographic space that has been defined by Western imagination, and thus their distinct histories quickly vanish, and they are unable to invent their local futures. Due to the great mobility and movement of people, we continuously balance in between the exotic and the familiar. As James Clifford put it:

> *The "exotic' is uncannily close. Conversely, there seem no distant places left on the planet where the presence of "modern" products, media and power cannot be felt. An older topography and experience of travel is exploded. One no longer leaves home confident of finding something radically new, another time or space. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighbourhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth. (...) Cultural difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence. A whole structure of expectations about authenticity in culture and in art is thrown in doubt.* (Clifford, 1996: 14)

Theatre director Shadwell's words in *The Buddha of Suburbia* seem to be an exact rendition of Clifford's:

> *Everyone looks at you, I'm sure, and thinks an Indian boy, how exotic, how interesting, what stories of aunties and elephants we'll hear now from him. And you're from Orpington (...). Oh God, what a strange world. The immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century* (Kureishi, 1990: 141)

However, in contemporary Britain, racist and xenophobic remarks continue to be made, even without the attempted back-up of scientific reason, in the name of adhering to an ideology ("We're with Enoch[1]") and for pure sentimental reasons

[1] Enoch Powell (1912-1998) was a Conservative Party Member of Parliament between 1950 and 1974 and an Ulster Unionist MP between 1974 and 1987. He held very controversial opinions on immigration, national identity, monetary policy; also he opposed the UK entry into the European Economic Community, later to become the European Union. He is best remembered for his 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech in opposition to British Commonwealth immigration to Britain and anti-discrimination policies of the Government. In it he claimed he had spoken to a constituent of his, a middle-aged working man, who made him aware of the dangers of immigration for the English indigenous population:

> *For reasons which they could not comprehend, and in pursuance of a decision by default, on which they were never consulted, they found themselves made strangers in their own country. They found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places, their homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition, their plans and prospects for the future defeated; at work they found that employers hesitated to apply to the immigrant worker the standards of discipline and competence required of the native-born worker; they began to hear, as time went by,*

("We don't like it"). The working-class accent coming out of Hairy Back's discourse against "wogs", "blackies", "niggers" (Cf. Kureishi, 1990: 40), as well as the comment made by Ted and Jean who never called their sister's Indian husband by his name ("It had been bad enough his being an Indian in the first place, without having an awkward name too". Kureishi, 1990: 33) seem to indicate a class-oriented discriminating attitude, in opposition to that of Helen, Hairy Back's student daughter ("But this [England] is your home (…) We like you being here. You benefit our country with your traditions". Kureishi, 1990: 74). or of self-made artist, Eva ("Karim Amir, you are so exotic, so original, it's such a contribution! It's so you!" Kureishi, 1990: 9).

Implicit and explicit racism and xenophobia

Instances of racism range from the implicit ones, such as lack of promotion in the 80's and 90's felt by some of the characters to be due to their origin, as in *Brick Lane* (Chanu, with a degree in English literature from Dhaka University and studying towards a degree in Social studies with the Open University feels he will not be considered for promotion in face of his white colleague, who does not hold a degree but goes to the pub with the boss) or in *The Buddha of Suburbia* ("The whites will never promote us ... Not an Indian while there is a white man left on the earth". Kureishi, 1990: 27) to the direct remarks about them, such as for example in *The Black Album* ("his mother, for instance, liked to make derogatory remarks about blacks, saying they were lazy" (Kureishi, 1995: 111) or *The Buddha of Suburbia* (Gene "killed himself because everyday, by a look, a remark, an attitude, the English told him they hated him; they never let him forget they thought him a nigger, a slave, a lower being". Kureishi, 1990: 227), or to the more explicit and physical ones in *The Buddha of Suburbia, The Black Album* or *The Satanic Verses*. The direct explicit racist acts are described as part of everyday life, as in the repeated attacks on Anwar and Jeeta's shop, in *The Buddha of Suburbia,* which they simply ignore and get on with their business, or as inevitable, yet regretful, parts of a foreign and devilish society, set in clear opposition to the home one, as Sufyian Hind says in *The Satanic Verses*:

> *more and more voices which told them that they were now the unwanted. On top of this, they now learn that a one-way privilege is to be established by Act of Parliament; a law which cannot, and is not intended to, operate to protect them or redress their grievances, is to be enacted to give the stranger, the disgruntled and the agent provocateur the power to pillory them for their private actions* ("Rivers of Blood Speech")

Also he feared that, although some immigrants and their dependents would want to integrate to the British society, the majority would not. The most famous part of the speech, the one giving its title, is the following one:

> *As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'. That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect. Indeed, it has all but come. In numerical terms, it will be of American proportions long before the end of the century. Only resolute and urgent action will avert it even now. Whether there will be the public will to demand and obtain that action, I do not know. All I know is that to see, and not to speak, would be the great betrayal*. (Cf. "Enoch Powell")

> *Plus also: they had come into a demon city in which anything could happen, your windows shattered in the middle of the night without any cause, you were knocked over in the street by invisible hands, in the shops you heard such abuse you felt like your ears could drop off but when you turned in the direction of the words you saw only empty air and smiling faces, and every day you heard about this boy, that girl, beaten up by ghosts* (Rushdie, 1998: 257-258)

The invisibility of the violent actors of racism is meaningful for the metaphorical interpretation of Britain as the evil land, it looks as if they are not done to real people by real people, but are part of some sort of abstraction, some diluted evil, which affects all people differently and in different doses. Such acts are also present in *The Black Album*, but this time the victims are identifiable, and violence is palpable and quantifiable:

> *The family had been harried – stared at, spat on, called 'Paki scum' – for months, and finally attacked. The husband had been smashed over the head with a bottle and taken to hospital. The wife had been punched. Lighted matches had been pushed through the letter box. At all hours he bell had been rung and the culprits said they would return to slaughter the children. Chad reckoned the aggressors weren't neo-fascists skinheads. It was beneath the strutting lads to get involved in lowly harassment. These hooligans were twelve and thirteen years old* (Kureishi, 1995: 74-75)

The general racist atmosphere is felt by the "new" population as an oppressive one: "The thing was, we were supposed to be English, but to the English we were always wogs and nigs and Pakis and the rest of it" (Kureishi, 1990: 53), or "We're third-class citizens, even lower than the white working class. Racist violence is getting worse! Papa thought it would stop, that we'd be accepted here as English. We haven't been! We're not equal! It's gonna be like America. However far we go, we'll always be underneath!" (Kureishi, 1995: 175). Chanu in *Brick Lane* has an explanation of his people and the image they give to the British; as the immigrants are mostly villagers coming from the same district, they recreate their closed society in Britain, and thus become simultaneously invisible as individuals and more visible as a mass. In this way they leave space for the racist British to consider all South-Asian immigrants alike, irrespective of their class, caste, ethnicity, religion or social group. The common denominator becomes the skin colour, and racist attitudes can easily find space: "to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan" (Ali 2003: 21).

Response to racism and xenophobia

And the response to racism and xenophobia is either the open opposition within the framework of the democratic society, through marches and protests (as in *The Buddha of Suburbia*), or pure fanaticism or absolutism in its different forms, from

simply obeying the religious rules and going to church (in *The Buddha of Suburbia* or *The Black Album*) to the public burning of books (also in *The Black Album*), or opposing violence with violence, creating a para-military organisation[2] (in *Brick Lane*).

Although mocked at by her cousin ("She was preparing for the guerrilla war she knew would be necessary when the whites finally turned on the blacks and Asians and tried to force us into gas chambers or push us into leaky boats". Kureishi 1990: 55), Jamila follows her own programme of feminist and ethnic empowerment (after her so-called "colonization" by her teacher. Kureishi 1990: 53), and represents in the novel the new cultivated type of Asian woman, ready to speak up for her community and for the ideals she supports. Her open sexual life (free sex with her cousin, then partnership within a commune with a man with whom she has a child, and finally lesbianism), as well as her marrying the Indian man her father had chosen as a rebellious act in itself ("Marrying Changez would be, in her mind, a rebellion against rebellion, creative novelty itself. Everything in her life would be disrupted, experimented with". Kureishi 1990: 82) distance Jamila from the traditionalist life of her parents. The feminism she embraces, the will to change the world and the strength required to do that make Jamila the positive personality coming out of the novels, in Kureishi's own words, "she went forward, an Indian woman, to live a useful life in white England" (Kureishi, 1990: 216).

On the other hand, religious "absolutism" is presented as an alternative narrative to the official one of the white British population, a validated alternative for that matter within the framework of the multicultural society, as long as it stays in its more peaceful forms and is represented by trips to the mosque, private prayer and respect for religious traditions. However, even those manifestations can lead to violent acts, most often addressed against oneself or members of the close family. One such example is pictured in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, when Anwar, determined to get his daughter Jamila to marry the man of his choice, forces his will upon the family. Kamir Amir, in whose voice the story is told, has distanced himself from these practices; his comment at Anwar's attitude reveals this change:

> *Like many Muslim men - beginning with the Prophet Mohammed himself, whose absolute statements, served up piping hot from God, inevitably gave rise to absolutism – Anwar thought he was right about everything. No doubt on any subject ever entered his head (...) His Muslim fatalism – Allah was responsible for everything – depressed me*
> (Kureishi, 1990: 172)

[2] Ali Laidi indicates globalisation as the source of this orientation towards Islam and even fundamentalism of the young Muslim community in Western countries; globalisation brings along the contempt of the Establishment, epecially the American one, towards a valorisation of diversity and an acceptance of Eastern life styles as valid ones, together with a decline in moral values in the West (Cf. Laidi)

Practicing their religion privately or going to the mosque are for the South-Asians living in Britain either completely immaterial and irrelevant, or on the contrary signs of belonging, proofs of being part of the same group and responses to a racist and xenophobic society. For Karim *In The Buddha of Suburbia*, the description of a mosque seems to represent yet another instance of his distancing from his community and their religious practices; a dirty ("the floor was sprinkled with onion skins") "dilapidated terraced-house" which reminds him of home through its smells (*bhuna gost*[3]), with the *Moulvi*[4] depicted in a somewhat ridiculous manner: "Moulvi Quamar-Uddin sat behind his desk surrounded by leather-bound books on Islam and a red telephone, stroking the beard which reached to his stomach" (Kureishi, 1990: 171-172). The image of the mosque depicted in *The Black Album* is completely different; this time Kureishi describes the mosque as a somewhat fantastic (in the sense of unreal) place of meeting for different people, the central point in their existence, where class, social group, nationality, race, age are irrelevant in the face of the common denominators: male gender and Islamic faith. Although the idea is of "joining" (Kureishi, 1995: 111) or belonging and the "atmosphere was uncompetitive, peaceful and meditative", the exclusion of women from this select club stands out:

> *Men of so many types and nationalities – Tunisians, Indians, Algerians, Scots, French – gathered there, chatting in the entrance, where they removed their shoes and then retired to wash, that it would have been difficult, without prior knowledge, to tell which country the mosque was in. Here race and class barriers had been suspended. There were businessmen in expensive suits, others in London Underground and Post Office uniforms; bowed old men in salwar kamiz*[5] *fiddled with beads. Chic lads with pony tails, working in computers, exchanged business cards with businessmen in suits* (Kureishi, 1995: 109)

Whereas the emphasis in the first description is on the building and the general appearance of the mosque, and the only person visible is the *moulvi*, in the second it is on the human bonding and the feeling of community belonging that it suggests. Quite clearly for the narrators of the two fragments indifference in the first case, as well as the profound spiritual elation and the sense of Islamic brotherhood (in opposition with the acts of racism described earlier) in the second one are the feelings they want to evoke.

A clearly violent attitude has its roots in this very religious feeling; it could be construed as a separate narrative of a part of the South-Asian population in Britain, and it seems to belong, as described in the novels, more to the second-generation immigrants. It appears to be their response to the racism of the British society

[3] *Bhuna gost* is a hot Indian curry dish

[4] The *Moulvi* or *Mawlawi* is the honorific Islamic religious title given to Sunni Muslim religious scholars or Ulema, which precedes their names (Cf. "Mawlawi")

[5] *Salwar kamiz* (also spelled kameez) is a traditional South-Asian dress worn both by men and by women, and which consists in loose pyjama-like trousers and a long shirt or tunic (Cf. "Salwar kamiz")

at large, people and institutions, and it was made possible by the very loose and permissive framework of the multicultural society, used (and abused) in their favour. In *Brick Lane*, the youth of the district try to organise themselves, after years in which for them the only escape has been violence and drugs. Three meetings are described (Ali, 2003: 194-200, 231-238 and 342-349), and the general impression is of young people not quite able to identify their needs and aims, and therefore not quite able to express them in a coherent way. Discourses on the dangers of globalisation and slogans such as "Think global, act local" (Ali, 2003: 238) are mixed with demands for mixed race block parties, with Asian music and DJs to attract young crowds. Gender is an issue, when Muslim women wearing nevertheless the sign of modesty, the burqua, want to voice their opinions, they are abruptly stopped: "The Qur'an bids us to keep separate. Sisters. What are you doing here anyway?" (Ali, 2003: 236). The meeting starts in fact as a protest against the UN sanctions over Iraq, with pictures of children dying because of lack of medication and food, and it is for a while on the verge of stirring violent protest ("We came together to get radical, man". Ali, 2003: 234); so much that a man in the audience feels he has to protest against it: "If it's violence you're advocatin', I shall have to renounce me vows to Allah" (Ali, 2003: 236). However, the war of leaflets, and the more physical battles between gangs of white or Asian boys do create an atmosphere of aggression and permanent fear. An attempt is made to unite the underprivileged working class, but as Chanu explains in his leftist sophisticated vocabulary, it is doomed to fail:

> *What they are doing, you see, is co-opting these immigrants into their grand political schemata in which all oppressed minorities combine in the overthrow of the state and live happily ever after in a communal paradise. This theory fails to take account of culture clash, bourgeois immigrant aspirations, the hatred of the Hindu for the Muslim, the Bangladeshi for the Pakistani, and so on and so forth. In reality, it is doomed to failure.* (Ali, 2003: 387)

The local attempt at organising the youth fails, the leader Karim chooses to return to a totally unknown Bangladesh to live there, but for a while it paralleled the global Islamic organisations, which lead higher impact terrorist attacks, like the September 11 one. In the discussion of the New York bombings, Karim and Nazneen reflect on who might benefit from violence. At Karim's assertion "nor Arab nation benefits. No Muslim, anywhere in the world. We are the ones who're going to suffer" (Ali, 2003: 317), Nazneen's unuttered comment is wiser: "It seemed to Nazneen that no one benefited" (Ali, 2003: 318). Also her interpretation of Karim's character shows a high understanding of human nature and of global issues:

> *Karim had never been to Bangladesh. Nazneen felt a stab of pity. Karim was born a foreigner. When he spoke in Bengali, he stammered. Why had it puzzled her? (...). Karim did not have his place in the world. That was why he defended it.* (Ali, 2003: 375)

This is unexpected to a certain extent from a woman constricted by the rules of her society to the private sphere of the household, but at the same time, Nazneen is a woman who towards the end of the novel proves she is ready to get rid of those constrictions: she refuses to return to Bangladesh with her husband, and instead stays in London, gets a job, learns how to skate, and tries to create a better future for herself and her two daughters.

Episodes of organised reactive violence are shown in *The Black Album* as well, this time in a students' community who create a group aiming to resist acts of racism and xenophobia against members of the community. The reasons for Shahid, the main character, to take part in the actions of the group are twofold; on the one hand, he feels the need to belong: "Shahid wanted a new start with new people in a new place. The city would feel like his; he wouldn't be excluded, there had to be ways in which he could belong" (Kureishi, 1995: 13). On the other hand, Shahid confesses he has felt a twisted kind of racism himself, feelings which stem from the aggression he was made to suffer:

> *I began to feel (…) in that part of the country, more of a freak than I did normally. I had been kicked around and chased a lot, you know. It made me terrifyingly sensitive. I kept thinking there was something I lacked (…). Everywhere I went I was the only dark-skinned person. How did this make people see me? I began to be scared of going into certain places. I didn't know what they were thinking. I was convinced they were full of sneering and disgust and hatred. And if they were pleasant, I imagined they were hypocrites. I became paranoid. I couldn't go out. I knew I was confused and …fucked-up"* (Kureishi, 1995: 8)

Shahid's reaction, which he tries to explain in explicit vocabulary to his new friends, is one of extremist racist violence, he went as far as wanting to join the British National Party. It is to a certain extent a normal reaction based on a psychological trauma, and by it, Shahid automatically seeks brotherhood with the whites by denying his own kind. In this respect, it mirrors Changez's words of abuse to his own people in *The Buddha of Suburbia* or Chanu's similar comments in *Brick Lane.* Shahid's assertion "I wanted to be a racist") together with his racist, xenophobic and misogynistic fantasies and the crude words he is using are clear indicators of his traumatic and confused stage:

> *My mind was invaded by killing-nigger fantasies (…). Of going around abusing Pakis, niggers, chinks, Irish, any foreign scum. I slogged them under my breath whenever I saw them. I wanted to kick them up the arse. The thought of sleeping with Asian girls made me sick (…). Even when they came on to me, I couldn't bear it. I thought, you know, wink at an Asian girl and she'll want to marry you up. I wouldn't touch brown flesh, except with a branding iron. I hated all foreign bastards (…). I argued…why can't I be a racist like everyone else? Why do I have to miss out on that privilege? Why is it only me who has to be good? Why can't I swagger*

> *around pissing on others for being inferior? I began to turn into one of them. I was becoming a monster* (Kureishi, 1995: 9).

Another member of the group, Chad, has been through the same kind of psychological trouble after his adoption by a white couple, with a racist mother who talked about how minorities were expected to blend in. Growing up in white England, Chad suffered another type of disorder: as a teenager he realised he had no connections with his home country, Pakistan, and tried to learn Urdu, which he spoke with an English accent. He is consequently left in an in-between space, not accepted by any of the two societies:

> *In England white people looked at him as if he were going to steal their car or their handbag, particularly as he dressed like a ragamuffin. But in Pakistan they looked at him even more strangely (...). Trevor Buss's [Chad's English name] got lost in translation, as it were"* (Kureishi, 1995: 89)

The way out for him is to become a member of the Labour Party, which he finds too racist, so he turns to the South-Asian community and creates the organisation which would eventually turn violent itself. Chad's words "I am homeless (…). I have no country (…). I don't know what it is to feel like a normal citizen" (Kureishi, 1995: 90) best express his rootlessness and his subsequent adaptation problems. For these very reasons, once he appears to find a niche for his need of belonging, Chad fully follows the ways pointed by the organisation's leader and embraces the violent actions he conceives. The episode of burning *The Satanic Verses* is a clear such instance; it depicts the aftermath of *fatwa* proclaimed by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, one year after the first edition of this book, when Salman Rushdie found himself under threat of death from the Muslim world for alleged blasphemy against Islam. Chad and Riaz in *The Black Album* try to justify the violence they would inflict on the author and the aggression with which they treat the novel by the insult brought to the Islamic world at large, of which they feel a part: "He [Rushdie] insulted us all – the prophet, the prophet's wives, his whole family. It's sacrilege and blasphemy. Punishment is death" (Kureishi, 1995: 140). To Shahid's good-will plea "If he's insulted us, can't we just forget about it? If some fool calls you a bastard in a pub, it's best to not think about it, you know. You shouldn't let these things get you down" (Kureishi, 1995: 140) and to his question "Would you kill a man for writing a book?" Riaz answers even more aggressively "Stone dead. That's the least I would do to him. Are you suggesting this is something wrong? (…) Sometimes there is violence, yes, where evil has been done" (Kureishi, 1995: 144).

Riaz in fact is the group's leader, who claims to be doing everything out of love for his own kind. Shahid imagines him as a weak child bullied in the school yard (Cf. Kureishi, 1995: 143), and thus we come to understand that once again it is from pure frustration that Kureishi seems to say violence stems. Past frustration at instances in which he had to show his weakness, but also present ones, at the lack

of common material and spiritual possessions and the certainty that he knew what was best for everybody else:

> *Riaz 'loved his people', but, unless offering assistance, he appeared uncomfortable with them. Riaz had little: no wife or children, career, hobby, house or possessions. The meaning of his life was his creed and the idea that he knew the truth about how people should live. It was this single-mindedness that made him powerful and, to Shahid now, rather pitiful* (Kureishi, 1995: 144)

The actual burning of *The Satanic Verses* on the college premises is described in detail (Kureishi, 1995: 184-189) as the deed of some confused youth, unable to distinguish between freedom of speech and action as democratic instruments and the very attack of these through violent action. Riaz believes that the book burning was an expression of democracy and reads in the attempts to stop him acts of repression, racism and discrimination against ethnic minorities: "Pardon me, but is the free speech of an Asian to be muzzled by the authorities?" and "Do you understand? (…) This is democracy" (Kureishi, 1995: 187). The audience enjoys the burning at a superficial level ("People hooted and clamoured as if they were at a fireworks display" Kureishi, 1995: 188); they do not feel it ideologically meaningful, as it has been the intention of the leaders. Shahid himself understands the discrepancy and unsuccessfully tries to pretend he is on the same wavelength as the leaders of his group. But although he sees the ridicule of the situation and the lack of perspective of the leaders, he still blames it upon himself for not being up to it. His profound confusion, as described by Kureishi, seems to be the general confusion of the Asian community in Britain, who try to find ideals to fight for and at the same time are not quite sure how to go about that:

> *The stupidity of the demonstration appalled him. How narrow they were, how unintelligent, how…embarrassing it all was! But was he better because he lacked their fervour, because he was trying to slink away? No, he was worse being tepid. He was not simple enough!*
> *'This isn't right', Shahid said to someone beside him. 'What's happening to our community?'* (Kureishi, 1995: 188)

The attitude of the teachers was diverse; some (Deedee) bluntly and bravely oppose the demonstrators, others (Bronwlow) support them. The principal is afraid she might be considered racist and does nothing to either prevent or stop the events:

> *The college principal would have to castigate the book-burners, but Shahid doubted that she'd take further action, for fear of exacerbating the situation. She'd long been suspicious of Riaz's group, but, afraid of accusations of racism, she'd secured them a prayer room and otherwise avoided them, even when their posters were inflammatory.* (Kureishi, 1995: 189)

For some critics this is the position of the Establishment in front of the subliminal and even the direct violence of terrorists/freedom fighters, who pretend they are not

doing anything while they in fact organise and plan attacks against the democratic institutions. Their argument is that allowing such groups to exist and offering them the freedoms guaranteed by the Western institutions create the context for their undemocratic subsequent actions directed against the very institutions which permitted their existence in the first place. Kureishi himself seems to support this view, together with the optimist opinion on the stability of the Establishment:

> *Normality was rapidly re-established. British institutions might be rotten, but they still stood, having existed for years; such a minor assault, or even dozens of such impacts, couldn't threaten much.* (Kureishi, 1995: 189)

On the other hand, the way the East in general and India in particular are fashionable in Western society among a certain type of intellectual circles, together with the decadence of the British society itself, are also mentioned in the novels by South-Asian authors. The artistic East, with its image of the wise and the exotic, yet familiar through spatial proximity, "other" is construed as an alternative to the intellectually and spiritually decadent West within a paradigm created by the influential leftist Oxbridge educated groups. The criticism of such a paradigm comes from the South-Asian community, through the voice of Karim Amir in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, who believes that it is a fantasy created for the benefit of an affluent middle class, who has never come into contact with either of the two worlds:

> *The actors wore clothes just like ours, only more expensive. The plays were three hours long, chaotic and bursting with anarchic and defiant images. The writers took it for granted that England, with its working class composed slogs, purple-nosed losers, and animals fed on pinball, pornography and junk-food, was disintegrating into terminal class struggle. These were the science-fiction fantasies of Oxford-educated boys who never left the house.* (Kureishi, 1990: 207)

The alternative is "outsiders" ("There's nothing more fashionable than outsiders", claims Shahid from *The Black Album*. Kureishi, 1995: 145), and indeed at least for a certain type of people, "India-blah, Bharat-burble, the so-called Wisdom of the East, is definitely back in fashion. In fact, India in general is hotter than ever: its food, its fabrics, its doe-eyed domes, its direct line to Spirit Central, its drums, its beaches, its saints" (Rushdie 2000: 496), as "brown was indeed the new black, in couture, in music, in design, on the high street, judging by the number of plump white girls prancing around wearing bindis on their heads and henna on their hands" (Syal, 2000: 109).

Being of the "right" gender, sexual orientation, race and class are felt to be the necessary ingredients for acceptance in these artistic circles, and Martin from *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, himself a white middle class male, tried hard and unsuccessfully to position himself in the right angle. However, he felt his pedigree did not allow him visibility, for "who wanted to watch a sitcom about three lads

much like himself? What conflict could there be, except a fight about the remote control or a woman?" (Syal 2000: 109). Humorously depicted, Martin's portrait is of an artist who feels betrayed by his origin in a society in which biographies seem to count more than talent, as they provide the experience necessary to enhance or even to replace it:

> *Now, if he [Martin] had been born a black woman, a single mother on a council estate with an errand ex-partner, bossy God-fearing parents and a radical lesbian rapper for a sister, he could write something amazing (...). He would have suffered the first prerequisite for creating Great Art* (Syal, 2000: 109)

A specific South-Asian case of racism is communalism, when members of a religious group or caste turn against another one, and an extreme situation is that of the Untouchables, or Paravans, present in *The God of Small Things*, in the tragic love story between a Syrian Christian woman and an Untouchable. The description of this group of people, considered outside the caste system, is done by Mammachi to her grand-children by emphasising the present so-called open-mindedness towards them (Mammachi believes she treats them fairly by sending their children to a special school exclusively for them, or by having them learn a trade) on the background of past humiliations (in Mammachi's girlhood):

> *Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.* (Roy, 1997: 73-74)

This revolting enumeration of the discriminations against the Untouchables do not however prevent the twins or their mother to love Velutha and to touch and be touched by him. Punishment will come though under the form of death and destroyed lives for all the actors.

An alternative way of dealing with racism is by effacing this category altogether. Rushdie presents this idea in two of his novels, as a normal condition in *Midnight's Children* or as an ideal to attain in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Several characters in *Midnight's Children* suffer a de-pigmentation of the skin; it is a physical condition, but moreover it is a spiritual one, felt as such by the *Rani*[6] of Coach Naheen, who claims to be "the hapless victim of [her] cross-cultural concerns. [Her] skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of [her] spirit" (Rushdie, 1984: 45). In the same way, Ahmed Sinai who "had long envied

[6] The *Rani* was a queen or princess or the wife of a Rajah in India ("Rani")

the Europeans their pigmentation" turns white in old age. For him "white" is the norm, the standard, and "black" only a pretence together with its admitted superiority: "All the best people are white under the skin; I have merely given up pretending" (Rushdie, 1984: 176). The same phenomenon is characteristic of the Indian business community who in the first nine years after Independence suffer from a similar pigmentation disorder: "It seems that the gargantuan (even heroic) efforts involved in taking over from the British and becoming masters of their own destinies had drained the colour from their cheeks (…) The businessmen of India were turning white" (Rushdie, 1984: 176). If for these characters, "white" and "whiteness" is something that happens to them naturally, for Ormus Cama in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, outstretching over the race barriers is an ideal to attain. If he does not manage it, his life and stage partner Vina, who was sceptical about this possibility, seems to be able to reach it in death:

> *It was always Ormus Cama's hope that it might be possible for human beings – for himself – to transcend the frontier of the skin, not to cross the colour line, but to rub it out; Vina had been sceptical, questioning his universalist premises, but in death she has indeed transcended all frontiers: of race, skin, religion, language, history, nation, class.* (Rushdie, 2000: 480)

It is indeed an ideal unfortunately until now unattainable. Hopefully the time when the cynical words of a teenage drug dealer in *The Black Album* addressed to Shahid, the main character, "You a Paki, me a delinquent (…). How does it feel to be a problem for this world?" (Kureishi, 1995: 120) will lose their validity is not far.

Conclusions

In conclusion, racism and xenophobia are often present in the Indo-English fiction and happen mostly at the point of interaction between Eastern and Western cultures, although they can also take the form of communalism on the South-Asian subcontinent. Having started theoretically as an instrument of control of the Empire in colonial times, racism has developed into physically aggressive and morally doubtful acts in contemporary Britain, as described in some of the novels under discussion. They receive an equally blameful response in the violent acts of the immigrant population, who, nevertheless, construe them as justified and democratic ones. Racism and xenophobia, although generally regarded as acts of violence against an Other imagined as different and invasive of the safe space provided by one's country, could also be read as violence against the self, as they provoke psychological and physical self-damage, as well.

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